

# Obscura Nox Animae

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## Heatherly

Harry Potter

Complete



# **Obscura Nox Animae**

**Heatherlly**

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## Summary

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### Description:

The entire Wizarding world believes Lily Potter was murdered by Voldemort on that fateful night in 1981, including the man who would've given his immortal soul to save her. But there's another side to Lily's sacrifice, ancient charms and hidden truths that may have the power to change everything.

# 1. Death and Rebirth

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**Obscura Nox Animae:** (Latin) *The Dark Night of the Soul*

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## Chapter 1: Death and Rebirth

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In the aftermath, Lily often wondered why Voldemort had given her the chance to save herself, not just once, but three times. The most logical assumption was that he'd simply been amusing himself before delivering the killing blow, knowing she'd never step aside and leave her baby undefended.

But if that had been the case, she wouldn't have survived at all.

Why spare *her*, someone who openly despised everything he stood for? What would inspire him to preserve the life of a woman he could only see as a Mudblood, with nothing to distinguish her from countless others who'd already been slaughtered at his behest?

Of course, none of these questions crossed Lily's mind on the night he came to murder her child. There was only room for hysterical pleas, words she would never recall after they'd been spoken, and a scattered internal monologue of, *Please no, not Harry... I can't bear it... Not my baby!*

"Stand aside, you silly girl. Stand aside, now."

Yes, she'd remember *his* words, along with the detached and altogether irrelevant observation that for a man so full of hatred, the insult he'd tossed in her direction was surprisingly mild. And she'd never forget how absurd it was that she'd had such a calm, logical thought in the midst of absolute terror.

When Voldemort raised his wand, some strange emotion flickered behind his eyes. It wasn't hesitation, exactly. Lily would be haunted by that look for years before eventually identifying it as speculative. He muttered something indistinguishable, just before her world shattered upon a high-pitched scream of, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Pain, pain... pain that was more than pain, a terrible severing that seemed to turn her inside out and tear her limb from limb. She wanted to scream, but she didn't have a mouth anymore. If she'd still had fingers, she would've clawed at the source of her agony, though whether to rip it to pieces or in a desperate attempt to hold herself together, she didn't know. All that existed was that piercing, burning green light that devoured everything she'd ever felt and been and known, though it made little sense that her mind would be able to distinguish the color, since she no longer had eyes to see.

It might have lasted for a few seconds or the span of a lifetime for all Lily knew. There was no beginning or end to the terrible interim where no reality existed beyond her own

suffering.

But then it was over. She was tipped over into blackness, reveling in the blissful absence of light and stimulation as she floated along on a velvety cloud of nothing.

Before she could get used to the sensation, she was solid again. Yes, that was the texture of grass beneath her feet. She *had* feet... yes, and a head and body, and a nose that picked up on the familiar odors of a fragrant autumn night. And ears... not only was she able to hear the sounds around her — the faint noise of a Muggle siren, the soft crunching of leaves somewhere out of sight — but her auditory capabilities were much more acute than they'd ever been before.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Sirius had once slipped James a shrinking potion. After a hasty trip to St. Mungo's, her fiancé had laughingly remarked upon the oddity of seeing everything at an exaggerated size — a teacup he could've slept in, an apple that could've crushed his diminutive figure. Lily now understood the surreal experience he'd been attempting to describe, as she stared in bewilderment at the forest of grass towering over her.

Had she been hit with a shrinking hex? But why would Voldemort...?

*Voldemort... then it all came back to her. Voldemort. **Harry.** Oh no... please, no.*

But then a cry sounded in the darkness, an aching familiar wail coming from some great distance above. Lily's throat tightened as she rushed toward the source of the noise, no longer caring about her unusual size or the obstacles she had to scramble over in order to get there. She had to reach her baby.

The man nearly stepped on her as he strode past. With a squeak of surprise, Lily dodged out of the way. She couldn't see his face, but she knew that scent, a unique odor of fragrant herbs and old books, and...

*"Severus?"*

When she tried to speak, the sound emerged as a tiny squeak. Well, there was no time to worry about that just now. Severus... what was *Severus* doing here? Had he come to finish what his master started? No, he wouldn't do that. Not to her.

Then again, why wouldn't he? She was, after all, a Mudblood.

Latching onto the top of his boot, Lily held on tightly as he entered the shattered remnants of her home. No... she had to stop him before it was too late, but *how*? She couldn't be more than a few inches tall, didn't have her wand or the power to use it, and even ordinary speech was beyond her capabilities. What was she supposed to do?

Meanwhile, Severus crept up the stairs, stopping in his tracks as he reached the place where James had been struck down.

*James, my poor James...* Lily cringed as he knelt beside her husband's body, bracing herself for some form of the cruel humiliation Death Eaters loved to inflict on their victims. But Severus only pressed his fingers to James's neck to check for a pulse, then rose and stepped away.

He moved more slowly as he approached the bedroom, his harsh, uneven breathing practically roaring in her ears. The door lay slightly ajar, faint yellow light spilling into the hallway. And then a soft snuffling noise broke the eerie stillness, followed by a tiny sob.

“Lily?”

In her mind, the boy she’d known and the future Death Eater had always been two separate people. *Her* Severus had died on the day he’d spat the word “Mudblood” at her... with those two syllables, she’d known she’d lost him forever.

Following that, it had been natural, even necessary, to imagine him as a stranger. How could any part of *her* Severus — awkward and shy, yet eager to please in his own quiet way — survive within a person who’d chosen to devote himself to a lifetime of hatred and cruelty?

But now it was the boy she heard as Severus whispered her name in the darkness. He seemed vulnerable, frightened, and then brokenly human as he entered the bedroom. Slumping against the wall, he remained oblivious to her presence as she was flung across the room with the sheer force of his collapse.

*Her* presence? No... Lily Potter was sprawled out on the floor like some macabre caricature of an oversized doll, features permanently frozen in terror as she stared out at the world through sightless eyes.

“No... no, Lily... oh *fuck*...”

Horried, Lily scampered away from her lifeless body, just as Severus crawled across the room to reach it. He pulled it into his arms, cradling it against his chest as he buried his face in the thick red hair.

“No, Lily, no... I’m sorry. Oh fuck, I’m so sorry...”

She heard it before Severus did, the low creak of the front door being pulled open. It wasn’t until heavy footfalls landed on the stairs that his head jerked up in alarm, his features twisted by a harrowing combination of fury, grief, bewilderment, and remorse. He looked half mad — no, *completely* mad as he aimed a muttered string of obscenities in the direction of whoever had just reached the top of the stairs.

But when he lowered his face to the body in his arms, *her* body, his expression changed again. All that was left was sorrow. He reached out and closed her eyes, placing a kiss on each lid and then one on her forehead before laying her gently on the floor.

And then he rose to his feet, still visibly shaking, and Apparated away.

## 2. Strange Arrangements

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### Chapter 2: Strange Arrangements

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Harry was hungry. Couldn't they tell by the sound of his cries?

Of course not, Lily reminded herself as the baby continued to scream. James had never known the difference either. He'd relied on trial and error to figure out if Harry needed something to eat or a dry diaper, whether he was tired or uncomfortable or simply needed a little affection. Things that were instinctive to a mother were a mystery to the rest of the world, starting with the men in front of her.

"Yer all right now, Harry. I've got you." Hagrid slung one arm over Sirius's shoulders, cradling the baby in the other as he murmured comfort to each of them in turn. Meanwhile, Harry continued to yell, probably wondering why no one had given him his customary nighttime snack.

"Poor little thing," Sirius managed to choke out. "He's terrified."

No, he wasn't. He was hungry, maybe a little confused, but that was all. And that was the one blessing in an otherwise horrible situation. He was too young to understand what had happened... that his parents had just been murdered.

Well, that wasn't exactly true, was it? Lily had seen her body before Hagrid had covered it with a quilt, placing it in the hall next to the bundle that had once been James. *Her* body. Cold. Lifeless. But how was that possible? She felt every bit as alive as she had before Voldemort had hit her with the Killing Curse.

Now she had no idea *what* she was, nor what she was supposed to do about it. She still felt like *Lily*, yet everything was twenty times the size it should've been and she'd lost the ability to speak.

Was this the afterlife then, some strange new reality where the deceased watched life move on without them? Perhaps. But if that was the case, why was she still breathing? Why did she shiver when a chill autumn breeze swept across the room from beyond the shattered wall? And why could she feel faint stirrings of hunger deep in her belly?

Hagrid released Sirius, scrubbing at his eyes with a meaty fist. "Wanted 'im dead as much as anyone, but not like this. And now poor little Harry..."

It took her a moment to realize that Hagrid was speaking of Voldemort. Yes, of course... she remembered an explosion, combined with an awful scream that hadn't belonged to her. She couldn't recall anything beyond that, and yet she'd known he was gone. Severus, Hagrid, Sirius... there'd been no urgency in their actions, no sense of the unspoken dread that had hung over the Wizarding world for as long as she could remember. There was only a strange sort of calm, which would've been peaceful if it hadn't been so heavily laced with sorrow.

Harry broke into a fresh round of sobbing, distracting her from her thoughts. Sirius reached for him with a sad smile. "Suppose it's my job to care for him now. I'm his godfather, after all. I just wish... well, don't worry, Hagrid. He'll want for nothing as long as he's with me."

"Erm." Hagrid paused, shifting uncomfortably. "Have no doubt yeh'd do right by 'im. No question of that. But Dumbledore... he's wantin' me to take little Harry to his aunt and uncle. Arrangements already been made."

Sirius dropped his hands, seeming relieved as the baby continued to wail. Lily couldn't fault him for it. As much as he loved Harry, he probably didn't have the faintest clue how to care for a child.

Still, he'd be much better than Petunia and Vernon. Forgetting herself, she opened her mouth to say so, then clapped it shut again when her words emerged as a tiny squeak.

"There a mouse in here?"

"Does it matter? This place is no longer fit to live in, even if someone could stomach it after..."

Hagrid turned toward the door, then hesitated. "Sure yer all right?"

Sirius gave him a stiff nod. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Right. Best be goin' then. They'll be expectin' us."

"How are you getting there?"

"I... ah, I hadn't thought of that."

"Take my bike."

Hagrid shook his head, though his eyes gleamed at the prospect.

"Take it," Sirius repeated more firmly. "I won't be needing it where I'm going."

The men shared a final embrace, but Lily was no longer paying attention. Horrified by the thought of being separated from her son, she glanced around frantically in search of a way to accompany them. Clinging to the top of Hagrid's boot wouldn't be feasible. She'd never have the strength to hold on while soaring through the air at breathtaking speeds. And that was doubly true if Hagrid operated the contraption the way Sirius had done. She'd be flung to her death.

Well, her *second* death.

Desperate now, she latched onto the hem of Hagrid's coat. She scrambled up with surprising ease, slipping into one of his pockets as he turned to leave the room. Something slimy moved against her in the darkness, but she ignored it, happy to find herself so close to her son. He smelled like baby powder and mild shampoo, sweetness and the clean odor of rice cereal. She breathed it in hungrily, wanting to drown herself in the comforting familiarity of his presence.

Harry stopped crying as soon as the bike lifted into the air. Secure in his basket, he made soft, contented sounds as they soared through the sky, marveling over the new experience.

Lily couldn't help smiling to herself. It was the same reaction he'd had when Sirius had sent him a toy broom for his birthday. Idly, she wondered if he'd grow up to have a talent for Quidditch like his father, then felt a lump in her throat as she remembered all over again that James was dead.

Her initial shock was beginning to wear off, though that did nothing to clear up her confusion. The only difference now was that it was more painful to think of what had happened, to remember that brief glimpse of James's face, features frozen in death. It hurt so much that she was tempted to push it away, desperate to lose herself in the sound of Harry's quiet laughter. But of course, she couldn't do that. She had to face it with all the bravery she could muster, needed to analyze every detail of that night until she could make sense of it all.

Okay, Voldemort had discovered their hiding place. That was the first mystery. Had he suspected Peter? Yes, there was no other explanation... unless Peter had willingly volunteered the information. He wouldn't have done that, would he? No... no, of course not.

How had he been captured? Tortured? It didn't bear thinking, especially since he'd gone through it on behalf of James and herself. Clearly he'd been broken in the end. That was painful to imagine, though hardly surprising. Why, *why* hadn't they gone with Sirius as their Secret Keeper? He would've been clever enough not to get himself captured in the first place, though Voldemort would've never broken him even if he had been.

Well, there was nothing she could do to change the past. Best to focus on the present, which meant figuring out what had happened to her and what might be done about it. Unfortunately, she didn't have a lot to work with.

Once the Fidelius charm had been broken, it had been easy for Voldemort to gain access to the house. He'd finished James without a second thought, which was no surprise. But what about her? He'd given her several chances to move out of the way. She'd heard him murmuring another spell just before he'd delivered the Killing Curse. What had it been? How had she escaped death, and why had he let that happen?

But that certainly wasn't the end of the mystery. How had Harry survived when he'd been the target all along? Had Voldemort really met his end in that little bedroom, alone with an injured woman and a defenseless baby? How? Who had killed the most powerful Dark wizard of all time, and how had they managed it?

On that note, what had happened to his body? A queer, unpleasant sensation skittered up her spine as she realized she hadn't seen it anywhere in the house. What if...?

The bike hit the ground with a jolt, bringing Lily back to her immediate surroundings. Hagrid dismounted, waiting patiently on the sidewalk until he was joined by two other speakers. She recognized their voices instantly, her heart filling with joy as they exchanged quiet greetings. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall... oh, wonderful! No matter what happened, Harry would be safe now.

But her optimism swiftly faded as Dumbledore ordered Hagrid to release the baby, his voice gentle but firm. Hagrid did as he was told, but not without a great deal of reluctance. She could feel his body shaking with sobs as he muttered a heartfelt goodbye, and she knew then that it was a lost cause. For a moment, she'd thought that one of the professors might



take Harry in, that he might be raised within the sanctuary of Hogwarts. Clearly, that had been too much to hope for.

But leaving him with Petunia? Why had Dumbledore decided this was the best course of action?

On one hand, it made sense. The guardianship of an orphaned child often passed to the closest blood relative. But didn't Dumbledore realize he was leaving Harry with strangers who had no ties to the magical world? Did he know about her relationship with Petunia... the bitter jealousy, the fact that they'd hardly spoken in years?

But there was no time to speculate further, nor was there anything she could do to change his mind. This was happening whether she liked it or not, and she needed to act quickly. Scrambling out of Hagrid's pocket, she slipped into the basket with Harry, then burrowed beneath the blankets. A reckless move, perhaps, but the others were too busy discussing some nonsense about impending celebrations to take any notice.

And then before she knew it, the basket had been set down on Petunia and Vernon's front porch, a helpless baby left alone in the darkness. Dumbledore had abandoned her child, dumping him off like some unwanted parcel. This night had been filled with no shortage of harsh realities, hitting her one after the other like a pile of falling bricks. But somehow, at least for the moment, this was the worst.

Now they were truly alone.

Harry was unperturbed by this new development, falling asleep almost immediately once everything was quiet. But it wasn't so easy for Lily. She stayed awake until dawn, fearful of what the morning would bring.

### 3. The Essence of Grief

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#### Chapter 3: The Essence of Grief

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There was no denying the truth. Lily was dead.

As much as Severus wanted to believe otherwise, there was no escaping it. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see her lying there, fragile and broken, her beautiful features frozen in terror. Not for herself, he knew, but for the child who had inexplicably survived the Dark Lord's wrath.

Yes, the boy had lived, somehow managing to defeat the most powerful Dark wizard in living memory. Miraculous, to say the least, but Severus was in no condition to speculate over that. Pain was the only reality he knew that night, the Dark Mark burning as it had never burned before, scorching him like a living flame when Voldemort had been struck down. But that had been nothing next to what he'd felt as he'd entered that bedroom, raw anguish tearing him asunder as he'd pulled Lily's body into his arms.

He'd gone to Godric's Hollow with a single purpose: save Lily, or die in the attempt. Even if he'd come too late, he would've done his best to curse the loathsome piece of shit into oblivion, hurling himself at his own demise like the most foolhardy Gryffindor would've done. Naturally, the Dark Lord would've swatted him down like a fly, and what a relief that would've been. No time to grieve for what he'd lost, no need to face a future filled with emptiness and shame. He would've died with the comfort of knowing he'd done everything in his power to avenge her, which had seemed like the best possible outcome if the worst should happen.

*The worst?* Severus let out a hollow chuckle, tipping his head back for another swallow of cheap Muggle whiskey. What a stupid shit he was, believing he'd had the faintest clue what "the worst" actually meant.

Well, that was what his miserable existence was all about, wasn't it? How many times had he fooled himself into thinking he'd seen the worst, only for life to find another way to kick him in the teeth? He'd thought nothing could be worse than Lily being Sorted into Gryffindor, but it had only gone downhill from there... the distance between them, the terrible rows they'd had, the way she'd hated the few friends he'd managed to make at Hogwarts. But that had been nothing compared to the day he'd called her a Mudblood, driving her away forever.

Forever... yes, it had *seemed* like forever at the time, leaving him lost and miserable when his apologies had come to nothing. He'd been afraid she was gone for good when she'd started spending more time with the Marauders, then had known it for certain when she'd had the audacity to begin dating James Potter, of all people.

What was worse than that? Nothing... not until the afternoon he'd walked down to the lake, stopping dead in his tracks as he'd spotted the couple making out beneath a tree.

Fucking Potter, pulling away from Lily's lips to nibble her neck... sliding a hand beneath her sweater while she hadn't done a thing to stop him. And as if that wasn't enough, Black had been sprawled on the grass nearby, glancing over his shoulder at Severus and then shooting him a knowing smirk.

Too devastated to retaliate, Severus had stumbled into the Forbidden Forest, vomiting all over the foliage as tears streamed down his cheeks. That had *definitely* felt like the worst moment of his life... alone on his knees in the dirt, retching uncontrollably as he'd tried to rid himself of the sickening image of Lily making out with *James Fucking Potter*.

Jerked back to the present by a wave of nausea, he scrabbled for the closest sturdy object, attempting to push himself to his feet. The dank little room swayed around him for a dizzying moment before he fell, taking the full impact on one elbow while shattering one of the empty bottles that littered the floor.

*"Fuck!"*

His mind didn't even register the pain. Perhaps the alcohol helped, but more than that, he just didn't give a shit anymore. Why should it matter? He could bleed to death right here and it would make no difference to the rest of the world. Once, there'd been someone who would've cared enough to grieve for him, but where was she now? Dead, and he only had himself to blame.

Dispassionately, he stared down at the open wound, watching as a torrent of blood spilled across the Dark Mark.

*Appropriate*, he reflected bitterly, just before he hunched over and vomited.

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When Severus awoke, he was lying on the threadbare couch with no idea how he'd gotten there. Opening his eyes, he groaned as the events of the previous night came rushing back, accompanied by a splitting headache. Oh god, he hated it... hated the piercing sunlight pouring through the curtains, the stench of the filthy room. He hated the ugly cushions beneath him, dark and stiff with his own dried blood. He hated Spinner's End, England as a whole... the entire fucking world, come to think of it.

But most of all, he hated himself.

He didn't know why he bothered to get up, stripping off his robes and then stepping into a hot shower he hated slightly less than he hated anything else. Why did he repair his shattered elbow, or heal the numerous cuts on his arms and legs? Perhaps it could be credited to that annoying human instinct to help the body fight for survival, long after the spirit had thrown its hands up in surrender.

But clearing the broken glass off the floor? What was the point of this shit?

Severus was through with life, with love and hope and hatred and misery and everything in between. Why couldn't he just end it then? He could think of twenty ways to get the job done, all of which were possible without having to leave the house. Why was he pulling on a clean robe, rather than using it to make a sturdy noose for himself? What was the point in putting a

spoonful of sugar in his coffee instead of lacing it with one of the numerous poisons he kept stored in the basement?

*Because I don't want to end like this.*

The thought came out of nowhere, both surprising and infuriating him.

*Why the fuck not? a much louder voice inside him demanded. Lily's dead, and it's your fault! What's left for you now? There's no one in the world who gives a shit about you anymore, or vice versa. Dumbledore will have no further use for you now that the war is finished. You'll probably return to Hogwarts only to find out that you've been sacked. You don't want to end like this? Bloody hell, Severus, it's already over! Why don't you just put yourself out of your misery?*

But the other voice persisted, soft and plaintive as it struggled to counter his overwhelming despair.

*Because I'm not a coward.*

And with that, the louder voice was silenced.

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Relieved that he still had the ability to Occlude, Severus sat across from Lucius in the stately drawing room, calmly sipping from a glass of bourbon. The rich amber liquid bore no resemblance to the cheap rotgut he'd drowned himself in after leaving Godric's Hollow, but that was no surprise. This had never been his world — purebloods and their fancy trappings, ancient traditions and carefully cultivated sophistication. He might've developed a bit of polish over the years, but that had been out of necessity, not because he felt entitled to this sort of existence.

"I still can't believe it," Lucius said quietly, running a hand over his stubbled jaw. "He was supposed to be invincible. How could he have fallen so easily, at the hands of a child, no less? It doesn't make sense."

Severus considered the question, having been too devastated — too *drunk* — to give the matter much thought the night before. But sobriety and a reasonably clear head did nothing to help him solve the mystery. He shrugged.

"You know they're out there celebrating, don't you? All those blood traitors and Mudbloods. They're calling him 'The Boy Who Lived' — the Potter child, I mean. I nipped down to Diagon Alley for supplies, and there was a whole group of them running around with lightning shaped scars painted on their foreheads. They're declaring it a national holiday in the Wizarding world. Ignorant fools."

"Did you encounter any trouble?"

Lucius shook his head. "They were too caught up in their revelry to notice anything else. It's only a matter of time though. You know that as well as I do. Once the Ministry gets involved..."

"Yes."

“What will you do, Severus?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. I suppose if I don’t end up in Azkaban, I’ll return to my post at Hogwarts. Well, if Dumbledore doesn’t sack me. Yourself?”

Lucius nodded. “It only makes sense to continue on in the task the Dark Lord set for you. You know, you’re quite lucky, Severus. You’re in a better position than any of us to claim loyalty with the other side. I envy you that.”

Severus bit back an incredulous laugh. *Lucky?* Of all the colorful descriptions he’d applied to himself over the years, *lucky* had never crossed his mind. And after what had happened to Lily? The idea was ludicrous.

“To answer your question, I intend to do what I must to remain out of prison,” Lucius continued, glancing up at him and then looking away. “I have a family to think about. And anyway, if the Dark Lord returns...”

“The Dark Lord is dead.”

“Do you believe that?”

Severus paused as an unpleasant shiver skittered up his spine. “I don’t know what I believe,” he said carefully. “But I know that the Killing Curse rebounded on him, destroying half a house in the process. I know there’s been no sign of him since, and the boy still lives. Do you really think...?”

“Well, yes, obviously *something* happened. But the Dark Lord has powers the rest of us can’t even begin to comprehend. Some of the things he’s said... well, I don’t know if it’s as simple as it seems.”

“I’ll have to speak with Dumbledore when I return to Hogwarts. I imagine he has his own theories, one of which might even be the truth.”

Lucius snorted. “Dumbledore must be over the moon right now, the batty old fool.”

Severus let that pass. Ordinarily, he might’ve pointed out Dumbledore’s vast wealth of knowledge, might remind Lucius that even Voldemort himself had treated the headmaster with grudging respect. But in light of Dumbledore’s catastrophic failure to keep his word, Severus wasn’t in the mood to defend his capabilities.

That was the unspoken question that haunted him — not what had befallen the Dark Lord, or how the youngest Potter had managed to survive. No, what Severus wanted to know was why the fuck it had happened in the first place. He’d always believed that Dumbledore was a worthy match for Voldemort, which was why he’d sought his protection when he’d learned that Lily was in danger. Had Dumbledore simply been careless? Or worse, had he allowed this tragedy to happen without trying to stop it?

It was well past midnight when Severus finally bade goodnight to the Malfoys and Apparated back to Spinner’s End. Not that he had any desire to go home, but it wasn’t like there was anywhere else he wanted to be either. It didn’t matter in any case. What he needed was solitude, a little more time to grieve in private before necessity demanded he return to the world of the living and pick up the pieces of his ruined life.

He trudged up the stairs, not even bothering to cast a simple *Lumos* as he entered his pitch black bedroom and collapsed on the narrow bed. An errant word flickered in his mind, some vague recollection of the feverish thoughts that had dominated his consciousness the night before.

No, the worst hadn't been stumbling across that traitorous article in the *Daily Prophet*, announcing the wedding of Lily Evans to Mr. James Potter. His helpless rage, his irrepressible envy over the wife and baby that should have been *his* (ignoring the fact that he'd never particularly wanted children)... that was *nothing* compared to what he was feeling now.

The worst had only been a figment of the imagination while there was the slightest hope things might change for the better. Of all the disappointment he'd suffered throughout his life, that was the lesson Severus found hardest to swallow. He'd never known true heartbreak because he'd always found something to cling to... the slightest possibility that Lily might forgive him, a chance that her marriage wouldn't work out after all, or simply that fate or circumstance would reunite them someday.

Failing that, just knowing that they'd lived in the same world, breathed the same air, shared a few happy memories... he'd had no idea what a comfort that was until it was gone, leaving only emptiness in its place.

Too stricken to do anything else, Severus buried his face in the pillows as his body began to shudder, understanding for the first time in his life what "the worst" truly meant.

## 4. Reluctant Saviors

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### Chapter 4: Reluctant Saviors

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A shrill scream pierced the morning stillness, jarring Lily from her exhausted slumber. Burrowing deeper into the blankets, she huddled close to Harry as he began to cry.

“For heaven’s sake, Petunia! What will the neighbors think with you out here shrieking like a... *dear god!* What the hell is that?”

“It appears to be a baby, Vernon.”

“Yes, I can see that. But what’s it doing on our front... oh, good morning, Gertrude! Did the little ones enjoy their holiday?”

Lily heard a shuffle, and then the basket was lifted into the air. “Let’s just take this inside and get it sorted out,” Petunia said quietly.

“Right.”

Petunia and Vernon’s house smelled like pine cleaner and fabric softener, overlaid with a wealth of more enticing odors that made Lily’s stomach unleash a pitiful growl. Toast and cookies, porridge and rice pudding... she tried to ignore her hunger as she and Harry were set down with a jolt that seemed far rougher than necessary.

“Well?”

“There’s a letter here, addressed to me,” Petunia said thoughtfully, and Lily heard the faint crinkle of parchment.

“What does it say?”

Petunia paused for a long moment. “My... my sister is dead. Her husband, too.”

“What!? How?”

“Murdered,” Petunia responded flatly.

“*Murdered?! Wait, so that means this baby is...*”

“Their son, yes. Harry.”

Vernon grunted, his voice growing louder as he shuffled over to the table. “Right. Well, what else does the letter say? What are we supposed to do with him?”

Petunia’s voice was hesitant as she responded. “It seems we are now his guardians.”

“What the... !? Out of the question!” Vernon thundered, causing Harry to break out into a fresh round of sobbing. “They didn’t... they can’t just *do* that, Petunia! Even if we *wanted* to take the boy in, there are proper procedures for that sort of thing! Paperwork. Government

agencies! You don't just... this is 1981, for god's sake! Decent people don't just go around leaving babies on doorsteps!"

"Apparently their kind do things differently."

"Exactly!" Vernon agreed, slamming his fist down on the table. "They do *everything* differently, and see what happens? Do you see, Petunia? Nothing good ever comes out of being abnormal. People like that get themselves murdered. And now they expect us to..."

"I'm sure we're the last people Lily would've chosen to look after her child. Unfortunately, I'm his only living kin."

"You aren't suggesting that we *agree* to this?"

Petunia sighed heavily. "I don't see where we have a choice in the matter."

"But..." Vernon trailed off, sputtering loudly before he continued. "We *agreed*, Petunia! We weren't going to get wrapped up in any of this... wizard business. And what about Dudley? Surely you don't want to raise our son around a... a *freak*!"

Lily cringed. She hated that word.

"No, I certainly don't *want* to. But this isn't about what we want, it seems."

Vernon's breath came in ragged pants as he struggled for a response. "What about government agencies? There are places for orphaned children, professionals who are better equipped to handle this. We could take him there. If we explain the situation, I'm sure..."

"We can't do that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because he's... well, these things are hard to keep secret. You know how the neighbors love to gossip. What if they found out that we refused to give a home to our orphaned nephew, knowing he had nowhere in the world to go? Can you imagine what they'd say about us? It's not as if we can explain all the... magic stuff without people thinking we're completely daft. All they'll see is that we abandoned a helpless baby."

Vernon seemed to deflate, dropping heavily into a chair. "I see your point. All right then, I suppose we'll just have to endure it somehow. But none of that wizard business! I tell you right now, Petunia, I won't have it in my house!"

"Of course not, dear."

"And Dudley comes first. No matter what."

"Naturally."

"Oh, blast it, I'm going to be late for work. I'm sure you can manage the rest. Good god, I can't believe the audacity of..."

The rest of the words were indistinguishable as he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"I suppose you're hungry," Petunia said a few minutes later, speaking directly to Harry for the first time. "Could use a change as well. I don't know what those people were thinking,



leaving you on the porch like some discarded parcel. You smell atrocious. Well, come on then.”

Before Lily realized what was happening, her sister lifted the baby from the basket, blankets and all. It was too late to grab hold of anything to anchor herself — her tiny body was flung through the air, landing with an audible thud in the middle of Petunia’s pristine kitchen floor.

Petunia screamed, nearly dropping the baby. She managed to plunk him back in his basket, then grabbed a nearby broom and began swatting wildly in Lily’s direction. A different infant’s cry, louder and more petulant, sounded from the floor above, joining itself to the cadence of Harry’s wails.

“Bloody vermin!” Petunia said, finally making impact as Lily slammed into a cupboard and sank to the ground.

“Tuney,” she tried to call out. “It’s me, Lily!”

But all that emerged was a feeble squeak, bearing the oddest resemblance to a...

“A *mouse!*” Petunia shrieked, as Lily scampered beneath the refrigerator to avoid the blows. ‘A filthy rodent!’ When her sister dropped the broom, Lily poked her head out, watching in silent fury as Petunia stalked over to the sobbing baby. “Not once has there been a pest in my home. Not once! Then *you* come along and not even an hour passes before... well, it’s no more than I should have expected. Now come on. I’m going to lose my breakfast if I have to smell your stench any longer.”

As soon as the footsteps faded away, followed by the sound of running water on the floor above, Lily darted out of her hiding place, searching for the closest reflective surface. It wasn’t difficult to find one — the bottom of the refrigerator was made of smooth metal, allowing her to take a good look at herself.

She let out another squeak, a noise that would have been a scream in human form, though it sounded exactly the same as every other sound she’d made since Voldemort had cursed her. Shaking her head in disbelief, Lily stared at the reflection of what appeared to be an ordinary field mouse.

No...

It wasn’t a charm. It couldn’t be. Charms didn’t leave corpses in their wake, nor were they anything more than an outward glamour designed to fool others at the most obvious level. But this... she really *was* an animal... or at least she could sense the animal’s spirit keeping company with her own.

The other presence was subtle, only making itself known in quiet, instinctive urges. An inexplicable temptation to chew through a stack of old newspapers in the corner, or the pressing desire to explore the odors that filled the room... bread and other grains, not the eggs and bacon she formerly would’ve craved.

Petunia stomped back into the room, and Lily darted behind the trash bin. Rice cereal... oh, that smelled delicious. She ignored the other scents that filled the air as her sister bustled around the kitchen, obviously preparing breakfast for the children.

After she'd carried the boys back downstairs and settled them at the table, Petunia snatched the receiver off the wall, jabbing in a number. "Godric's Hollow, if you please. The local funeral home. What? Which one? I don't bloody care!"

It was strange to listen as her own funeral was planned, more than a little unnerving. Lily hated the idea of being buried in that place, so far from the city where she'd grown up, her family and friends. It was no surprise that her sister didn't want her buried nearby, but didn't she at least merit a place in the family plot in Cokeworth?

But the more she thought about it, the more it seemed right somehow. Godric's Hollow was foreign to her in many ways, but it was still the place where Harry, James, and herself had lived together as a family. And being buried beside James, which she quickly understood was Petunia's intention... well, that wouldn't be so bad, would it?

Lily's grief was a quiet thing, a dull, persistent sorrow that hovered around the edges of her consciousness. True, she'd been preoccupied with all the other shocks she'd had to endure since his death. But even if that hadn't been the case, she couldn't imagine herself mourning him with the all-consuming, life shattering intensity that might've been expected of her. That realization made her feel terrible, but it was the truth.

Then again, wasn't that why she'd chosen him in the first place? He'd been easy, safe, satisfied with calm affection without expecting anything more. That bond had allowed her to be close to him without putting herself at risk.

It didn't say much for her Gryffindor courage, but after her volatile friendship with Severus, she'd needed stability. To be with someone as uncomplicated as James had been a balm to her heart, a welcome solace after everything she'd been through. She'd fought so hard, unable to keep Severus away from that dark path he'd seemed destined to tread. And it had taken her much longer to recover from that loss than she'd ever acknowledged, even to herself.

Caring for Severus had been an endless succession of dizzying highs and abysmal lows. He'd been the biting chill in the dead of winter, a raging blizzard threatening to consume her body and soul. And then without warning, that intensity could shift to radiant sunlight, warming her in a way that made her feel as if the storms would never come again. But they always had, of course, each one seeming worse than the last.

Severus had always been... *more* somehow. More passion, more intensity, certainly a great deal more intelligence. He'd loved more deeply and hated with more ferocity than anyone Lily had ever known, and that had *frightened* her. She had never felt in control of herself where he was concerned.

Following the Muddblood incident, she'd been devastated. It had felt as if her soul had been hollowed out, drained of warmth or comfort, leaving a raw, aching wound where her heart should have been. There were still no words to describe that feeling, how deeply it had gutted her to lose him. She'd only known that she never, *ever* wanted to be that vulnerable again.

Beyond any other reason, that was why she hadn't accepted his apologies, why she'd chosen that particular moment to throw up her hands in surrender. The realization that his presence in her life promised nothing less than salvation or destruction for them both had

been too much for a young girl who'd just wanted to feel safe and happy, to enjoy the few short years she'd had left before being thrust into the horrible war that awaited them all.

Yes, Severus had been more than other boys. *Too much*, in the end.

When she'd agreed to start dating James, he'd been like a mild spring day after years of violent storms. Refreshingly simple, never any nasty surprises or sudden changes in mood or behavior. Lily had simply floated along, calm and secure, confident in her ability to steer her own course. Eventually, she'd recognized his potential as a dependable husband, an ideal companion she could rely on in chaotic times. Their relationship might have been more companionable than driven by passion, but that had been enough for her.

And so she mourned him quietly, rationally, no uncontrollable outbursts or raw, gutwrenching agony. Others wouldn't have understood why she grieved this way, but it was entirely appropriate to the bond they'd shared.

Severus, on the other hand...

Lily couldn't stop thinking about it. Severus, whispering her name, cradling her lifeless body in his arms as he'd vented his grief in ragged sobs. She would've never expected that kind of behavior, never would've thought he still cared enough to react to her death with such intensity. How was she supposed to feel about that? Unnerved, perhaps. And yet knowing that some part of *her* Severus still existed, enough to mourn her with such sincerity... that knowledge burrowed its way inside her heart, filling a place that had lain empty since the day she'd lost him.

Later that evening, Lily settled herself beneath Harry's makeshift crib, listening to his soft breathing as she drifted off to sleep. Their situation was far from ideal, but at least Harry was safe, warm and well fed, sleeping peacefully in the tiny cupboard.

The cupboard was one of many things she'd find plenty of time to fume about tomorrow. Tonight, it was enough just to know they would survive to see another day.

## 5. A Path to Redemption

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### Chapter 5: A Path to Redemption

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“Peppermint Humbugs,” Severus snarled, shaking his head at the ridiculous password as the gargoyle slid aside to let him pass.

Finding the headmaster’s office deserted, he slumped into the nearest chair, reaching inside his coat for the bottle he’d stashed in an inner pocket. He raised it to his lips before changing his mind, conjuring a tumbler instead.

Drinking wouldn’t make what he had to do any easier, but he downed the cheap whiskey anyway, relishing the familiar burn as it made its way down his throat. One swallow, two, and then he hurled the empty glass at the wall, watching dispassionately as it shattered all over the floor.

The portraits jerked awake with startled squeaks and muttered complaints, though only Phineas Black took the risk of addressing him directly.

“Do you mind? We’re trying to sleep here!”

“Fuck off,” Severus said sourly. And then for good measure, he conjured a second glass and flung it directly at the gilded frame. With a shout of alarm, Phineas crowded into a neighboring painting just in time to avoid impact.

They watched him warily after that, silently, with pronounced scowls and disapproving stares. Severus didn’t give a shit... as long as they were quiet, he could ignore them easily enough. Did it matter that the busybodies were about to witness the most humiliating moment of his life?

Did *anything* fucking matter anymore?

Occlumency and plenty of alcohol had served him well for nearly a week now. He’d relied on them both, his overwhelming grief reduced to a low, constant buzz in the back of his mind as he’d sat in the darkness back at Spinner’s End. He’d disconnected from everything, blocking the Floo, then setting the *Daily Prophet* on fire without a second glance after the first headline had proclaimed, “An Unprecedented Victory for the Wizarding World!”

Assholes.

Only when a missive had arrived from Hogwarts had he roused himself somewhat, knowing he had no choice but to open the damned thing.

*Severus,*

*Please report to me in my office at your earliest convenience.*

*Albus*

He hadn't bothered to shower or shave before responding to the summons, nor had he troubled himself to put on a clean robe. A quick glance in the mirror was almost frightening — he didn't care for his appearance even at the best of times, but the reflection staring back at him had evolved from unpleasant to positively grotesque. Greasy black hair fell in matted tangles around a face so translucent it could only be described as gray. Cold, bloodless, with only the jarring contrast of a scraggly black beard to break up the ashen monotony.

He'd lost a great deal of weight, too, his thin frame held together by nothing more than bone and sinew, black robes dangling from his limbs like some macabre scarecrow.

To make matters worse, his robes were filthy... he could smell a sickening cocktail of stale booze, body odor, and the acrid aroma of Muggle cigarettes emanating from himself every time he shifted in his chair.

Good.

Maybe when Dumbledore saw him, he'd begin to understand the consequences of his negligence. Perhaps he'd realize that some damage was irrevocable. Severus might still draw breath, but in all the ways that mattered, he was as dead as Lily herself.

With that thought, he prepared himself to do something that was contrary to his very nature. Sucking in a deep breath, he dropped his defenses, exposing the true depths of his grief. It slammed into him like a Stunner to the chest, ragged gasps for air soon turning into hoarse, wordless cries that echoed through the silent office. That was the price to be paid for Occluding. The pain wasn't lessened, merely delayed, piling up behind the shields like a dam containing water.

This was why all the books he'd read on Occlumency stressed moderation, reminding practitioners that it was necessary to lower their shields at regular intervals to maintain that crucial divide between sanity and madness. One book had even included a tale about a wizard who'd ended his life because he'd chosen to Occlude for months on end, rather than deal with the relatively minor setback of a missed promotion at the Ministry of Magic. By the time he'd dropped his shields, that mild disappointment had morphed into such overwhelming anguish that he'd chosen to poison himself rather than suffer through it.

A handful of days wasn't on par with a few months, of course, but losing Lily was also far more devastating than missing out on some silly promotion. It *hurt*... so much that Severus was tempted to jerk his shields back into place and say, "To hell with it."

He didn't.

By the time Dumbledore arrived, he was hunched over in his chair, arms wrapped tightly around his midsection as his body heaved with violent sobs. Lily... dead... gone forever... his fault... his fault...

"Severus?"

He didn't look up.

"Severus, please."

"H-how," he managed from between gritted teeth. "How did it happen?"

Dumbledore paused. "You don't know? It's been all over the papers."

*"Haven't been reading the fucking papers!"*

"I see," Dumbledore let out a heavy sigh. "The Potters were under the protection of the Fidelius charm..."

"Yes, yes," Severus snapped impatiently. "I assumed as much. How was the charm broken? Who was their Secret Keeper?"

"You really *have* been out of the loop, haven't you?" There was a rustling of papers at his desk, and then a copy of the *Daily Prophet* was slid into Severus's lap.

He stared at the headline in disbelief before his eyes moved down, momentarily hypnotized by an image of Sirius Black raving maniacally at the camera. It took a minute to process what he was reading. No matter how much he hated the man, he would've never thought that Sirius would betray his closest friend, the person he'd seemed to have loved above all others.

Severus snorted to himself. Well, why wouldn't he? Black was obviously a lunatic, something he'd known for years. Now he had the evidence lying right here in his lap, screaming up at him like a fucking madman.

He wanted to be enraged, wanted to curse and shout and swear vengeance, no matter that Black was already in prison and well beyond his reach. Blind fury... that would be far preferable to what he felt right now... sad, hollow, realizing that Lily had misplaced her trust in all the people who should have protected her. Had she known that by the end? Or had she gone to her death with some measure of faith still in her heart?

Of course, he knew the answer to that. Lily would've never given up. No, not even with her last breath.

Tears were coursing down his cheeks again, hot and bitter, and he knew this was the moment to say what he needed to say. Raising his head at last, he looked Dumbledore straight in the eye, feeling a flicker of satisfaction when the older wizard visibly cringed in reaction to his haggard appearance.

"I thought... you were going... to keep her... safe..."

"She and James put their faith in the wrong person. Rather like you, Severus. Weren't you hoping that Lord Voldemort would spare her?"

If he'd hoped to make the old man feel guilty, he'd obviously failed in that task. Trust Dumbledore to turn it around on him, keeping himself clean and pure as always. But he'd promised... *promised*, so responsibility for Lily's death lay as much with him as anyone else. He could avoid it all he wanted, but they both knew the truth. That would have to be enough. For now.

"Her boy survives."

What the fuck did that have to do with anything?

"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"

A flood of images spilled across his mind. Green eyes, wide and innocent, gazing at a shabby little boy without a trace of judgment, even after he'd botched their first introduction. Those eyes, sparkling with excitement as she'd come racing across the playground, waving her Hogwarts acceptance letter wildly in one fist. Lily's eyes, sweet and pure, pools of wonder surrounded by a thick fringe of dark lashes. Utterly perfect in every way. How many versions of those eyes had he seen over the years, impossibly beautiful whether they were bright and filled with laughter, or dark and stormy in a moment of fury?

Those eyes... dull and lifeless as they'd stared at nothing. Eyes that would never crinkle at the corners when she laughed, or flash with some mysterious emotion he couldn't put a name to. Eyes that would never turn his way again, filled with fondness or frustration, or...

Forgiveness.

"Don't!" he choked out. "Gone... dead..."

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

Damn him. He knew exactly what he was doing. But why? Just to prove that he'd been right all along? Did he really think that Severus didn't *know* that by now... that he hadn't known it from the moment he'd discovered that Lily's life was in danger? Why rub it in?

"I wish... I wish I were dead," was all he could manage.

"And what use would that be to anyone? If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

"What... what do you mean?"

"You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son."

Severus stared at him, aghast. "He doesn't need protection. The Dark Lord has gone."

"The Dark Lord will return," Dumbledore said calmly, "and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does."

It was a possibility Severus had only briefly considered, too consumed by grief to give the matter much thought. But the certainty in Dumbledore's voice gave him pause. Despite his conflicted feelings toward the older wizard, particularly at the moment, he knew better than to doubt that kind of conviction.

So the war wasn't over, merely on hiatus while the Dark Lord recovered his strength. Fan-fucking-tastic.

But then again... an emotion pricked at the edges of his mind, something beyond the anger and the guilt and the terrible sadness. Yes, he owed it to Lily to protect her son from harm. Vile spawn of Potter's or not, it was the least he could do under the circumstances. But beyond that...

Maybe he could finally become what he should've been all along. Someone who did the right thing, not the wrong one. Someone who put aside his own feelings for the sake of others, no matter the cost to himself, his sanity, his life. *That* was the Severus Lily would've loved... the Severus who would have never lost her to begin with.

It was too late to save her, to ever hope he'd earn her forgiveness. But still, protecting the boy was something... and in a world with nothing left, it could easily be *everything*. Penance for his mistakes, a shot at redemption, an opportunity to find the peace he'd been certain was beyond his reach forever. All for her son, and through him, all for her.

Yes. *Yes*.

Severus felt no sense of loyalty to the Darkness for obvious reasons, but the same could be said for the Light. Both had betrayed him in different ways, robbing him of the only person he'd ever loved. He knew now that neither side had ever given a damn about him, only what he could do to further their precious agenda.

But Lily... *her* allegiance had never wavered. And so for her sake, he'd take up the cause, taking on all those battles she could no longer fight for herself. Oh yes, he'd protect her fucking son... and may the gods help anyone who tried to stand in his way.

Realizing that Dumbledore was watching him closely, Severus pulled up his shields once more, his features relaxing into a smooth mask.

"Very well," he said, relieved that his voice was reasonably steady despite the vehemence behind his words. "But never... never tell, Dumbledore. This must be between us. Swear it! I cannot bear... especially Potter's son. I want your word!"

"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you? If you insist..."

He chose to ignore this, along with what appeared to be genuine sadness in the old man's eyes. Now that he had a purpose to fulfill, the need to take action, to move past everything he felt straight to what he could *do* about it, was paramount.

"Where is the boy now? What must I do?"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "You misunderstand me, Severus. Harry is perfectly safe for the time being, and likely to remain so for the next ten years. I've entrusted him to the care of Lily's sister, Mrs. Petunia Dursley. The blood ties he shares with his own kin are far more powerful than any protection you or I could provide. Until the time comes for him to begin his schooling..."

Severus cut him off with a loud snort. "If you left him with that shrew, he's in more danger than we thought. Do you have any idea what that woman is like?"

"Do *you*?" Dumbledore countered sharply. "From what I understand, you haven't seen her for many years. A childhood rivalry doesn't necessarily mean..."

"Rivalry? It was nothing of the sort. That girl was the cruelest, nastiest... not only to me, but to her own sister, too. You don't know..."

Dumbledore silenced him with a penetrating look. "I don't know that people can lash out when they're feeling jealous or threatened? Or that it's entirely possible to push away those we love out of fear of losing them? Come, Severus. Petunia cannot be the monster you imagine her to be. In some ways, the two of you aren't so different."

"I am *nothing* like that... that..."



"I'm disappointed you feel that way," Dumbledore said, his voice soft and solemn as he paced across the office. "Empathy can ease many of our hardest burdens. I daresay a bit more of that quality would make the task you have set before you less difficult to swallow."

"I'm doing this for Lily," Severus said coldly. "I can certainly empathize with her wish to protect her son. Beyond that, it's of no matter to me. The boy could be a mutant for all I care — and as he's James Potter's spawn, I wouldn't rule out that possibility. Make no mistake about it, Dumbledore. There will be no attachments. There will be no happy ending. I will do what I must, what I have promised to do. Nothing more."

Dumbledore sighed. "Very well. No man can be forced to feel what he isn't willing to feel. I just hope that..."

"So what am I meant to do with the next decade of my life?" Severus interjected before he could get too maudlin. "Assuming, of course, that you're sacking me."

"My boy, whatever gave you that idea?"

Severus hesitated. "Well, I don't imagine the Wizarding world as it stands now will appreciate its children being instructed by a former Death Eater."

"The Wizarding world will just have to get used to it," Dumbledore countered with a hint of amusement. "If I were in the mood to be more accommodating, I suppose I could bring you back later when some of the commotion has died down. But why wait? I still need a Potions Master, and you need something to occupy your time until you can take a more active role in Harry's protection."

Ten years... ten years of teaching miserable excuses for students, most of whom had little desire to learn. Ten years of walking the familiar halls of Hogwarts, faced with painful reminders of Lily at every turn. Ten years doing a job he hated, amidst a staff who stared at him with eyes full of suspicion, their conversations coming to an abrupt halt whenever he entered a room.

Ten years, spent at the only place that had ever felt like home.

Without further thought, Severus accepted with a curt nod.

"Good," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Very good. The students will be returning from their holiday the day after tomorrow. I'll expect you to have pulled yourself together by then. Sleep, bathe, eat something, yes?"

For the first time, the old wizard's eyes came dangerously close to a twinkle. Severus knew it was time to make his escape.

"Of course, Headmaster," he responded obediently. "Will that be all?"

"Yes, Severus. For now."

## 6. Precautionary Measures

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### Chapter 6: Precautionary Measures

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Like most Muggles, the Dursleys were easy to find.

James and Lily's wedding announcement, retrieved from an old copy of the *Daily Prophet*, had listed the bride's sister and brother-in-law among her next of kin, along with her mother and father (both deceased).

Severus frowned at the mention of Lily's parents. Too intent on incinerating the fucking thing the first time he'd come across it, he hadn't actually read anything except the headline. A separate search turned up an obituary for Mrs. Margaret Evans dated March 11, 1978, followed by another for Mr. Daniel Evans, published on June 17 of the same year.

He hesitated, feeling a moment of genuine grief for the people who'd shown him far more kindness than his own parents had done. Dead? Neither of them could've been older than their late 40s, which was young even by Muggle standards. What could have happened to cut their lives short within months of one another? Severus was tempted to investigate further, but that would have to wait for another time.

Meanwhile, he had a specific purpose in mind, one that prompted him to rise from his comfortable armchair in front of the fireplace and stalk over to the gilded mirror that was affixed to the back of the bathroom door.

The expressionless face he found staring back at him looked a little better. A decent meal and a healthy dose of Dreamless Sleep the night before had brought the slightest bit of color back into his pallid skin, and the dark circles beneath his eyes weren't quite so pronounced. A quick shower had restored his hair to its usual lank condition, and the itching caused by his overgrown whiskers had provided enough motivation for a much-needed shave. But he was still more gaunt than usual, with a haunted look in his eyes that was rather disconcerting.

Of course, a few simple glamours could take care of that if he felt so inclined.

He didn't.

Instead, his lips twisted into a smirk as he threw open the doors to his wardrobe. There would be no Muggle clothing this afternoon, no attempts to make his appearance even slightly less offensive. He selected his blackest, most billowy robes and drew them on, finishing off the ensemble with his best pair of dragon hide boots and a thick velvet cloak that trailed the ground behind him.

The school was deserted as he made his way across the grounds to reach the Apparition point... one final day of blessed silence before he was obligated to resume the miserable facade that passed for his normal life.

A few telephone calls from a public booth just outside of Diagon Alley yielded an address and phone number for Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Dursley, along with Mr. Dursley's occupation and place of business. Following that, he'd stopped for a bottle of whiskey and a pack of Muggle cigarettes, certain he'd need both before the day was over.

And then he was off to Little Whinging, a town that was certainly named appropriately if Petunia was one of its residents. Severus strolled leisurely down the street in a swirl of voluminous robes, ignoring the gawking idiots he passed along the way as he scowled at the perfectly manicured lawns and identical houses. Muggles were such peculiar creatures. Why would anyone spend so much money just to be like everyone else?

4 Privet Drive was only distinguishable from the other bland residences by the address carefully stenciled on the mailbox. Severus stalked up the immaculate driveway, making a spontaneous detour to trample across a carefully cultivated bed of tulips before finally arriving on the front porch. He cast a cleansing spell on his muddy boots, then extended a long, pale finger and rang the bell.

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Lily was dozing beneath Harry's crib when the doorbell sounded, followed by the sharp clatter of heels against the linoleum as her sister crossed the kitchen floor and emerged into the hall. Curious, she poked her tiny head out of the cupboard to watch.

"Coming!" Petunia called pleasantly.

There was a series of clicks as locks were unfastened, followed by a sharp gasp, and then the front door was slammed shut with a resounding thud.

"Impeccable manners, as always," drawled a familiar voice, muffled through the thick wood. "Are you going to let me in, or shall we give your neighbors plenty of time to speculate over what business a weirdo like me might have with the disgustingly respectable Mrs. Dursley? It makes no difference to me. I'm sure I can find plenty of ways to amuse myself while I wait. *Evanesco!*"

The door squeaked as it was jerked open again. "What are you doing?! For god's sake, put that thing away!"

Smirking, Severus slipped his wand into the sleeve of his robe.

"Y... you! What...? Why are you *here*?"

"As much as I'd love to stand around watching you attempt to wrap your feeble brain around the reality of my existence, I'm afraid my time is limited. So let's just get the inane pleasantries out of the way, shall we? Good afternoon, Petunia. Yes, it *has* been a long time. You look exactly the same — not that that should be taken as a compliment, mind you. Me? How good of you to ask! I..."

"What do you want, Severus?" Petunia hissed from between clenched teeth.

"I've come to discuss the boy."

"There's nothing to discuss."

“Oh, I beg to differ.” Severus paused to flick an invisible speck of dust off his sleeve. “Now will you be inviting me inside, or shall we have this conversation right here?”

“I’m not letting you in my house!”

“Very well,” said Severus, wearing a bored expression. “Albus Dumbledore informs me that the child has been left in your care. As someone who is quite familiar with your... feelings concerning the Magical world...”

“*Keep your voice down!*”

Severus ignored the hysterical note in Petunia’s voice, elevating his own just a little more with each word he spoke. “I’ve taken it upon myself to journey from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to inform you...”

“*All right!*” Petunia shrieked, opening the door wide. “Get in here!”

Severus smirked as he shouldered past her. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Lily shrank back into the darkness as he entered the foyer, wrinkling his hooked nose in distaste as he surveyed the spotless house. She should be nervous... hell, *terrified* that a Death Eater was standing just a few feet away from her sleeping baby. But ever since she’d seen Severus weeping over her body, she’d wondered if the Order had somehow been mistaken about his true allegiance.

After all, few wizards had been identified beyond a shadow of a doubt as followers of Voldemort. True, the company a person kept and the ideals they spouted went a long way when it came time to point fingers, but the organization was shrouded in secrecy, its members carefully disguised whenever they were seen at all.

Could Severus have escaped it somehow, that dark fate that had seemed inevitable during their final years at school? The other Order members had never failed to list his name among the suspects, but as far as she knew, none of them had even seen him since graduation. Was it possible that...?

“Okay, spit it out,” Petunia said tersely, interrupting Lily’s thoughts as she slammed the door and turned around with her arms folded across her chest.

“What, no tea and biscuits?” Severus said mockingly, raising one eyebrow in an uncannily familiar gesture. “Very well. I’ve come here to inform you that if any harm comes to Lily’s son while under your care, you will deeply and *repeatedly* regret it by the time I’m through with you. Do I make myself clear?”

From her vantage point, Lily saw a flicker of fear in her sister’s eyes, but it was gone almost as quickly as it had appeared. “What’s it to you?” she snapped, resentment rising to triumph over momentary trepidation. “From what I understand, Lily was smart enough to sever all ties with you years ago. Isn’t it a little pathetic to involve yourself in her business at this late date? What could you possibly hope to gain from it?”

The coldness in Severus’s eyes was so palpable that the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. Lily shivered.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again with a barely perceptible shake of his head. “My reasons are irrelevant,” he finally said in a stiff voice. “Suffice it to say that we find ourselves

in a similar position — responsible for the safety of a boy whose mother could no longer tolerate our presence in her life. Or was it the other way around in your case? I suppose it doesn't matter now. Just make sure no harm comes to him, or..."

"Lily was a freak!" Petunia suddenly exploded. "You, that husband of hers, all of you, freaks! Can you blame me for...? Nevermind. Of course you do. But whatever you think of me, I would never... I'm not a monster!"

"Such a subjective word," Severus said smoothly, his lip curling into a sneer as Petunia's face turned a more mottled shade of red.

"I didn't ask for this, you know," Petunia continued, her voice high and uneven as she paced across the tiny room. "All I ever wanted was a normal life, and I *had* it! I had it, until that... that *brat* was left on my doorstep! Now I'm stuck with him, and no doubt he'll be a freak just like she was! It's not fair! Why should I..."

She clamped her mouth shut as Severus closed the distance between them in a few swift strides, shrinking back as he loomed over her much smaller form.

"Fair, Petunia?" he said, his voice deadly quiet. "How dare you stand here whining about a minor inconvenience, when your own sister... at least you still *have* a life to ruin. Don't fucking talk to me about *fair* when Lily isn't even cold in her grave. And don't you *dare* blame her for..."

Severus was shaking as he trailed off, his expression feral as he bared his teeth at Petunia. For a moment, Lily was certain he was about to hit her. Instead, he swung around and drove his fist into the wall. Chunks of plaster rained down all over the spotless floor as he withdrew his hand, casting a disinterested glance at his bloodied knuckles.

"Are you *insane*?" Petunia shripped, stumbling over her feet as she took a couple of hasty steps backward.

"Close enough," Severus said softly. "I wouldn't try my patience, at any rate."

"You'll have to pay for that!"

"Indeed?" He raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And exactly how do you intend to enforce such a demand?"

"I..." Petunia started, then looked almost relieved as a loud, petulant wail sounded from the floor above. She turned back to Severus with a scowl. "There, are you happy? You've woken him up! Now if you don't mind..."

"Yes, I'll be more than happy to leave. But not until I have your word that the boy..."

"I'm not going to hurt him!" Petunia snapped impatiently. "Now will you just *get out*!?"

"With pleasure," Severus responded, giving her a mocking bow before turning in a swirl of black robes and striding to the door.

"Wait," Petunia said quietly, her voice strangely free of any irritation for the first time since Severus's arrival. "Don't you want to see him? He looks just like..."

"No."

And just like that, he was gone.

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Those first few weeks were interminable, with nothing to do but speculate over unanswerable questions. Lily tried to be grateful for what she *did* have — she was alive and able to remain close to her baby, even if she wasn't able to speak or do much else. She could count herself lucky if she ignored the terrible isolation of her current condition, along with the dismal reality of not being able to hold her son, to care for him, to comfort him.

Yes, she tried to make the best of things. Nothing was more important than her son, after all, and he was bathed, fed, and changed regularly, even if all this happened without a trace of the affection he'd been accustomed to in the past. Lily tried to ignore the Dursleys' coldness, tried to turn a blind eye when attention was lavished on little Dudley in stark contrast to her own neglected son. She *had* to focus on the positive. Otherwise, she'd go mad.

Nonetheless, she found her own ways of making her feelings known. Ragged holes chewed through Vernon's favorite shoes after he'd had the audacity to refer to her child as, "that disgusting brat." This was soon followed by the methodical shredding of Petunia's silk flowers in response to her shouting at Harry for spilling his cereal.

It was pointless, really. But in a world filled with helplessness, even the smallest action was a comfort.

Lily often wondered if she was destined to spend the rest of her life trapped in this body. How long did mice live anyway? Two years? Three? Was there nothing she could do to let anyone know that she was still *here*? Could the spell be broken? How could she find that out when she had no contact with the Wizarding world?

In a moment of desperation, she'd made her way to the kitchen one night, determined to spell out a message on the linoleum. She'd begun shredding old newspapers, carefully dragging each piece into place. L... I... L...

But then she'd been forced to scamper under the refrigerator to avoid Vernon, long before she'd come anywhere close to spelling out a coherent message. And of course, the fat oaf had plowed right through the fruit of her labors, leaving a mess of tattered paper in his wake.

It seemed there was no choice but to resign herself to her inevitable fate, to make the most of her dwindling time with Harry while hoping his circumstances would improve after she was gone.

Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid, Sirius... they would protect him in the years to come, wouldn't they? And would Severus be part of his future? Lily found herself dwelling on the unpleasant scene she'd witnessed, remembering the ferocity in her former friend's voice as he'd threatened Petunia. It was disconcerting to realize how much he still cared for her, that he was willing to go out of his way to look out for her son when she hadn't even spoken to him in years. But deep down, she knew that the feeling was mutual — she might've given him up as a lost cause, but she'd never stopped caring about him. She knew now that she never would.

It was too late to matter now, but at least that realization made her feel a little less alone.

## 7. Straight to Azkaban

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### Chapter 7: Straight to Azkaban

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The Aurors were on hand to apprehend Severus as soon as he set foot inside the Hogwarts grounds.

One second, he was absently Vanishing the stub of his cigarette while mentally calculating how many classes he'd have to suffer through before winter break, and the next found him in chains. Magical bindings wrapped around him like the Muggle straitjacket he'd seen once in an old movie on Lily's parents' television, choking, constricting, not leaving room for so much as a flicker of movement.

He'd sensed the Aurors before the ambush. Perhaps he could have fought them off had he chosen to do so. But what would've been the point in defending himself? Resistance would only add additional offenses to a list that already guaranteed a life sentence in Azkaban.

Had Dumbledore prepared for this inevitability? The question tormented Severus as he closed his eyes against dizzying sights and sounds that were far more overwhelming when forced to Apparate against one's will. His stomach roiled, a sickness he hadn't felt in years, as two pairs of hands gripped him hard enough to leave bruises on his bony shoulders. There was no need to wonder where they were taking him. He'd known their destination long before his feet slammed into the ground, a damp chill seeping into his bones as he opened his eyes to view a dank, gray room.

So this was Azkaban. Like all wizards, his fear of the place was coupled with morbid fascination. Few ever lived, or at least maintained their sanity, long enough to report the horrors that went on inside these walls. The secrets of the ancient prison were shrouded in mystery, as impenetrable as the cloaks worn by the Dementors who maintained their silent vigil over the innocent and guilty alike.

"Strip him."

A flick of a wand and he was naked, not even allowed to maintain the small measure of dignity his underpants would've afforded as he was poked and prodded, flashes of light illuminating the dim room as a number of detection spells sought out hidden contraband.

"He's clean."

Another wave of a wand, and he found himself clad in prison garb, barely noticing the roughness of the cheap wool as he welcomed the warmth it provided.

"Pockets?"

The other Auror, obviously the younger of the two, rifled through Severus's discarded robes. "Five Galleons and a few Sickles, a bit of Muggle money, cigarettes, a piece of parchment with an address written on it, and his wand. Shall I break it?"

Severus cringed.

“No,” the older Auror responded curtly. “Not until after the trial. This piece of scum will be convicted, no doubt, but we never break wands without an official verdict of guilty.”

“When will that be?”

“A month from now. Perhaps two. The Ministry is extremely backed up at the moment. Anyway, let’s get this over with so we can go home.”

There wasn’t much to see... at least, not at first. It wasn’t until Severus was guided outside into a downpour of freezing rain that he realized he hadn’t been in the prison at all. Behind him lay a squat building that must’ve been set aside for receiving prisoners. Before him loomed an enormous black mass, sinister and foreboding, blotting out the meager light of a crescent moon.

Oh Merlin... he should’ve fought them, should have gone into hiding or forced them to kill him on the spot. Something, *anything* to escape the icy fingers of panic that clawed at his throat as they dragged him closer, one step forward and then another, in the direction of the only place in the world that had ever made him want to scream in horror at the sight of it.

Nonetheless, he kept his face impassive as he was guided through a crumbling passageway, remaining stoic as the door was unbolted and he was ushered inside. He hadn’t survived the war by cowering like a child, and had no intention of doing so now.

He didn’t react to the noises emerging from deep in the bowels of the fortress, wracking sobs and piercing screams that ricocheted off the thick stone walls. The place stank of human refuse, of mildew and death and deep despair, and for the span of a heartbeat, he wished for the freedom of movement to fall to his knees and beg to be taken away. But he was a man who’d served the Dark Lord, one who had borne witness to countless horrors that transformed the pitiful screams into a cadence that was eerily familiar to his ears.

Yes, he could handle this... he’d find a way to stomach anything that lay within this abominable prison, just as he’d done with every other atrocity that had made him want to flee in terror or retch in disgust.

*Show no weakness. Weakness equals death.*

“This way, Mr. Snape,” the younger Auror barked out as his companion murmured a succession of spells that were obviously meant to lower the outer wards.

And then he was taken into another room, identical to the last. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the wall, trying not to flinch as the chill spread over his body, marking the approach of what could only be a Dementor, possibly two or three of them.

*“Expecto...”*

“No!” the older Auror commanded harshly. “Put your wand away, man, for Merlin’s sake. We’ve taken the prisoner far enough. Let’s... let’s get out of here.”

Just like that, they were gone, and then no more than a few seconds later, a trio of black clad specters floated into the room. They gathered around Severus, propelling him forward with the lightest touch. He walked obediently ahead of them, because to do otherwise... well, the consequences didn’t bear thinking.



He managed a weak shield, enough to draw a curtain around his past regrets, but not sufficient to protect his present worries from the pervasive atmosphere of despair that invaded his senses as they passed by cell after cell filled with occupants who were so filthy, so emaciated, that they barely resembled human beings anymore. He averted his eyes at the sight of a lifeless body, trying not to wonder how long it would take before it was noticed and disposed of properly.

*There's nothing Dumbledore can do for me now, he thought to himself as he was herded into a tiny cell. Even if he could, why would he bother? He has the entire Wizarding world at his fingertips, and I'm just a worthless Death Eater who is entirely disposable now that he's gotten what he wanted out of me. His plan to have me protect the Potter boy was probably nothing more than a cruel joke. Foolish Severus... let him believe someone might actually have some use for him. Give him some small measure of hope, then strip it away as his final punishment.*

The cell contained a narrow bed covered by a dingy, moth-eaten blanket, a rusty old chamberpot next to a grate in the floor that was obviously intended for the disposal of waste, and a small sink attached to the back wall, porcelain chipped and stained with age. There were no windows.

Severus dropped heavily onto the bed, muttering a curse as his tailbone connected with the hard surface. Another bruise... he'd lost count of them by now.

"Severus! Severus, is that you?"

He lifted his head in surprise, then rose and stalked over to the bars. Across the corridor was another set of iron slats, between which peered a familiar face... one he'd fervently hoped never to see again.

"Bellatrix," he acknowledged with a slight nod.

"I was wondering if we'd see you here! I was beginning to think you'd made a deal like some of the others..." She trailed off, her lips curling into an ugly sneer. "Cowards, the lot of them. I can't wait until the Dark Lord returns. It will be quite clear to him who is loyal and who is not."

"Indeed."

"When is your trial?"

Severus kept his face blank. "A month from now, apparently. Perhaps two."

*A lifetime.*

"I've already had mine," Bellatrix informed him proudly. "Guilty, naturally."

"Of course."

*Crazy bitch.*

"Oh, don't look so sulky, Severus. I'm sure yours will turn out the same. And isn't it wonderful? When the Dark Lord sees how much we have sacrificed on his behalf..."

But he wasn't listening anymore. Dark shapes were moving back down the corridor. He struggled for a stronger shield as a picture of Lily's lifeless body rose behind his eyes. So young, so beautiful... such a waste. And it was all his fault. All his fault.

"Meal time," Bellatrix whispered as she withdrew a little further into her cell. "They feed us at odd hours around here. The food is repulsive, but we must eat it anyway. It's important to keep up our strength. He will have great need of us when he returns, I'm just sure of it."

At first, Severus assumed the Dementors would be bringing the food, although it was incongruous to imagine the soul sucking demons doing anything as human as delivering plates of nourishment to the prisoners. It turned out he was right — when he heard the scrape of a utensil against some sort of metal dish coming from Bellatrix's cell, he turned around to discover a bowl of porridge and a chunk of what appeared to be extremely stale bread lying on his bed.

House-elves? That was the only logical explanation, even though he'd never known the creatures to prepare any dish that was less than exemplary. He dipped his spoon into the watery mixture and thought wistfully of Hogwarts, dreaming of a hearty helping of hot roast beef, paired with new potatoes boiled in a succulent mixture of butter and fresh herbs.

Severus was hungry, an unexpected sensation that didn't go away even when he found himself scraping a layer of mold off of one corner of the bread before placing it in his mouth. Then again, perhaps it wasn't so surprising. He hadn't eaten since the night before, far too intent on confronting Petunia to worry about trifles such as food. He deeply regretted the oversight now... would it have killed him to stop for a sandwich or something?

As he lifted the spoon to his lips, grimacing at the bland flavor of the overcooked oats, he couldn't help wondering how long it would take before he looked like those dirty, skeletal figures he'd seen sprawled out across their beds, or huddled on the floors of their dismal cells. Not long, surely... he ran a hand across his already prominent ribs, his lips curling into a humorless smirk as he forced himself to choke down another bite of porridge.

The real question, the one he didn't want to consider too deeply just yet, was why he was making the effort at all. Why prolong the inevitable, the blessed relief of death which must surely be the only way he could hope to escape this place? Why allow for even the tiniest flicker of hope — an unknown benefactor, an unanticipated pardon — when there was clearly no chance for either?

Only a few minutes later, a chill wind whistled through the prison, extinguishing all of the torches which had previously shed at least a small measure of light into his cell. Total blackness, deeper and more sinister than any Severus had ever experienced in his life. For the first time, he could begin to understand why Lily had been afraid of the dark.

"Bedtime!" Bellatrix chirped cheerfully from across the way. He ignored her, setting his dishes aside and drawing the thin blanket over himself, despite the fact that he wasn't remotely sleepy. Exhausted, yes, drained to the core, but not in a way that made him believe he'd actually be able to find any rest in this hellish place. And so he waited out the night, curled tightly around himself, shivering violently as he listened to the anguished cries that signified what must have been dozens of nightmares occurring all around him.

Once he'd gotten settled a bit, Occlumency came more easily. Powerful shields rose to reduce the lingering terror and heart wrenching despair to a dull sort of misery that really wasn't much worse than anything else he'd felt since Lily had died. And when morning made its presence known with a sickly gray light that somehow made the prison even more dismal than it was under normal circumstances, he rubbed his finger through a thick layer of grime on the floor, then made the first mark on the wall beside his bed.

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There were three marks when the Dementors came for him. They didn't speak, of course, but their meaning was clear as they entered the cell and surrounded him, urging him forward out into the corridor.

"Good luck, Severus!" Bellatrix called after him. "I hope to see you back here soon!"

He kept his eyes on the ground as they wound their way through several passages and down a flight of stairs, emerging into the room where he'd first entered. He couldn't manage even the tiniest flicker of hope in response to the sudden change, only a feeling of dull resignation when he came face to face with the same pair of Aurors who'd brought him to this place. A brief respite, maybe, a final taste of fresh air as he traveled to and from what was probably his impending trial... nothing more. It wasn't anything to get excited about.

But he felt the slightest bit lighter as they emerged from the prison and back into the Apparition room. Removed from the presence of the Dementors, Severus became something like himself again... and as foolish as it might've been, hope was still buried somewhere deep inside his heart. It lay battered, savaged by too much loss and far too little kindness, but lived on nonetheless, whispering that maybe, just maybe, life had given him one more chance after all.

That hope grew stronger as his robes were returned and he was permitted to dress himself, then solidified into something bright and real as his wand was placed in his hand.

"You have been cleared of all charges, Professor Snape," the older Auror muttered, looking skeptical. "Please allow us to return you to Hogwarts."

"No need," Severus said stiffly, then sneered at them both as he Apparated away.

*Assholes.*

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And then he was back at the gates as if it had never happened at all. They'd returned all his possessions, even his cigarettes, one of which he greedily shoved between his lips, igniting the tip with a whispered word. Closing his eyes, he exhaled deeply. Merlin, that felt good... almost as good as the magic coursing through his veins, swift and strong. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he cast a spell that wasn't intended for some useful purpose. A twirl of his wand and the pile of fallen leaves floated up to dance in an intricate pattern before drifting back to earth.

Lily had always loved that trick.

“Headmaster,” he said respectfully, striding into Dumbledore’s office just a few minutes later. “I don’t know what you did, but... thank you.”

Severus hadn’t realized how much he valued his freedom until it had been taken away. He didn’t want much when all was said and done, only the chance to honor the promise he’d made to protect the Potter boy. The one path to redemption, the only sacrifice he could make on Lily’s behalf that would count for anything after all the wrongs he’d done. Perhaps it was too late to hope for anything else, but in this at least, he didn’t intend to fail.

“There’s no need to thank me. It shouldn’t have happened to begin with, especially here. I had already put out word that I was to be consulted before any attempts to apprehend you were made, but you know how the Ministry can be...”

“Couldn’t find their own asses with both hands and a detailed map?” Severus commented dryly.

Dumbledore let out a chuckle, swiftly disguised as a loud cough. “Would you like some tea, Severus?”

“Yes,” he immediately responded, surprising himself. In all his years at Hogwarts, both as a student and a professor, he’d never taken Dumbledore up on any of his inevitable offers of refreshment. But then again, this was the first time he’d ever come straight from Azkaban, having existed for three days on abysmal food and tepid, slightly brackish water. Hell yes, he wanted some goddamned tea.

“Cream?”

“No, just two sugars.”

He ended up staying for three cups and more biscuits than he could count, only stopping when he noticed the old man watching him with that annoying twinkle in his eye. Shifting uncomfortably, he folded his hands in his lap and averted his gaze.

“Please, Severus, have more if you wish.”

“I’m fine.”

“Very well. Do you feel up to resuming your classes in the morning? If you need another day or two to recover...”

“No, I feel just fine.”

Dumbledore scrutinized him closely, then sighed. “In that case, I have no choice but to take your word for it. I’ve been covering your classes for the last few days. Standard syllabus. You should have no trouble picking up where I left off.”

With a nod of acknowledgment, Severus rose and turned to go.

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Back in his quarters, he scowled at his reflection, then immediately went into the bathroom to run a tub of hot water. Stripping off his robes, he threw them in the fireplace and set them ablaze with a quick spell — not necessary, but symbolic somehow. He’d only dipped one toe

into the bathwater, however, when he felt an annoying itching sensation he remembered all too well from childhood.

“Damn it all to hell,” he swore to himself, thankful that he had a direct passage to his private lab, safe from prying eyes. Brewing while stark naked wasn’t the wisest idea, but the solution he needed, one that destroyed head lice, was simple enough to prepare.

Fucking Azkaban... his hair was squeaky clean, every inch of skin scoured to the point of redness before he was finally satisfied. *Never again*, he swore to himself as he pulled on a pair of loose sleeping pants. *Never again*.

The next morning, fortified by a large breakfast and the best sleep he’d had in weeks, Severus swooped into his classroom, privately relishing the moment when the cheerful smiles of the second year Gryffindors dissolved into expressions of disappointment and trepidation. Clearly, they’d been expecting at least one more day under the indulgent tutelage of Dumbledore.

His good mood lasted until the first cauldron exploded, something that should’ve been impossible since the potion he’d assigned didn’t even require the application of heat.

“Twenty points from Gryffindor!” he snapped at the terrified boy.

Oh yes... it was going to be a long ten years.

## 8. Familiar Faces

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### Chapter 8: Familiar Faces

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Secluded in the cupboard, Harry lay on the narrow bed with his nose buried in his favorite book, *The Cat in the Hat*. He giggled to himself as he flipped through the pages, filling Lily with warmth as she watched him from beneath the dresser.

He had about a dozen books, none of which had been a gift. They'd been dumped off on him as soon as Dudley decided that watching the telly was much more fun than reading. Petunia had relented, as she always did, shoving the books into the cupboard where they were soon forgotten.

Well, forgotten by everyone but Harry, who treated them like a priceless treasure.

Five years had passed since that night in Godric's Hollow, though little had changed aside from Harry himself. He was six years old now, small for his age, with messy dark hair and a sweet smile. It was amazing that he still *had* the ability to smile, and yet he did, taking pleasure in the simplest things. Meanwhile, Dudley walked around with a sour expression on his face, never running out of reasons to complain. When Lily looked at it objectively, she could almost say that Harry had the better end of the deal.

... almost.

Indeed, it was wonderful that he was able to find joy wherever he looked — a butterfly alighting on the window, or the antics of a squirrel playing in the yard. But that didn't change the fact that he deserved so much more. Lily wouldn't have wanted to see him treated like Dudley, spoiled and pampered, but a kind word, the occasional gift, perhaps a cake on his birthday... why were even the little things too much for Petunia to manage?

If nothing else, at least she wasn't as harsh when her husband wasn't around. Lily had learned to dread the sound of the car pulling up in the driveway, followed by heavy footsteps coming up the walk. When Vernon strode through the door, it was open season, full of rude insults and unjust punishments. Petunia ignored Harry for the most part when she was on her own, but Vernon made him a constant target, encouraging everyone else to do the same.

The only time Petunia ever intervened was when Vernon threatened Harry with physical punishment. She had a way of stopping him with a single argument: what would people think if they saw the bruises? Lily didn't know if this was the real motivation behind her objections. She could've just as easily been mindful of Severus's warning, or maybe she even had some shred of decency left. Regardless of the reason, Lily was grateful for it.

Unfortunately, Petunia did nothing to protect Harry from his cousin. Nor did she shield him from Vernon's repulsive sister Marjorie, who'd had the audacity to beat him across the shins with her walking stick. Lily had never wanted to kill someone as much as she had when she'd seen her son curled up in his bed, rubbing the welts on his skinny little legs as he'd

struggled not to cry. There was little she could do about it now, but if she ever had the chance...

"Dinner!" Petunia bellowed, startling Lily from her thoughts.

Lily followed Harry through the baseboards, as she always did when he wasn't shut away beneath the stairs. Sometimes she wondered if she did it just to torture herself. It wasn't as if she could put a stop to the harsh treatment he received. But she didn't feel right about leaving him alone with the Dursleys either, so she always went along, offering her silent support even if he never knew she was there.

Vernon was in an unusually good mood that night, praising his wife's pot roast before turning to his son to ask how he was doing at school. He ignored Harry altogether, giving the boy a rare opportunity to eat in peace.

"Marge telephoned me at work today," he announced after a few minutes. "She's interested in making plans for the summer."

"Wonderful," Petunia responded pleasantly. "When is she intending to visit?"

"She's not. She was calling to ask if we wanted to go on holiday with her. Just the family, of course. She'll be visiting the seaside at the end of June."

"That sounds lovely! But... well, what about *him*?"

Lily didn't need to see Petunia to picture the bony finger she was jabbing in Harry's direction.

Vernon snorted. "Why not just dump him off with Mrs. Figg? She's been offering to look after him for ages."

"She's a little strange. Are you sure...?"

"Petunia, we haven't had a proper holiday in seven years. Poor Dudley has never even been to the ocean, and all because we spend every summer looking after your sister's brat. Besides, who cares if she's weird? So is he!"

"I want to go!" Dudley whined, pounding a utensil on the table. "Harry ruins all my fun!"

"There, there, pet," Petunia crooned in a soothing voice. 'We won't let him spoil your holiday.' To Vernon, she said, "I wasn't suggesting that we shouldn't go, only making an observation. Shall I call Marge to confirm our plans?"

Vernon grunted in approval.

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Two months later, Lily was concealed in the bottom of Harry's knapsack as he headed over to Mrs. Figg's house. He came to a standstill, knocked timidly, and then the door creaked open, followed by a thin, reedy voice that beckoned him to come inside.

"Up the stairs, Harry. Second door on your right. Get yourself settled, and then I'll give you something to eat. Looks like you could use it."

Lily noticed a peculiar odor, cringing as she recognized it for what it was. *Cats*. Lots of cats. *Damn*. Coming here had been a huge mistake, but what choice did she have? Staying behind at Petunia's while Harry was left alone with a stranger for two weeks? Not a chance.

Harry headed up the stairs, entering what must've been the guest room and dumping his knapsack on the bed. This was followed by faint noises, and then the door opened and closed again with a soft click. After a few minutes of silence, Lily crawled through the T-shirts and rolls of socks, poking her head out of a gap in the top of the bag.

Finding the room empty, she ventured out to explore her surroundings... a narrow bed covered by a mismatched quilt, along with furniture made of cheap pressboard. The floor was littered with rag rugs that had seen better days, and the walls were papered with photographs of cats, from tiny kittens to creatures so large they must've been some sort of hybrid. There were pictures on top of the wardrobe and the low bedside table, both animals and people gazing back at her from tarnished frames.

She spotted one in particular and moved closer, her eyes widening in disbelief.

*Arabella?*

It didn't make sense... and then it made so much sense that she was amazed she hadn't thought of it before. Despite being a Squib, Arabella had been one of the most loyal members of the Order. She'd been useless as a fighter, but Dumbledore had relied on her to take care of many of the more mundane tasks. Paperwork, shopping, preparing meals, research...

Keeping an eye on a little boy, perhaps?

Yes, of course. It was the only logical explanation, one that filled Lily with relief. Dumbledore was still looking out for Harry, if only from a distance, making sure there were people nearby who could be trusted. Granted, it hadn't made much difference so far, but it wasn't Arabella's fault that the Dursleys had refused her previous invitations either.

Distracted by her realization, Lily hadn't noticed the large Maine Coon as it had nudged the door open and slipped into the room. Head low, ears flattened, it stalked her with deadly intent, finally letting out a low growl that alerted her to the danger. She squeaked in horror, barely managing to scramble back into Harry's bag where she concealed herself beneath a tangle of clothing.

"Tufty?" called a voice from downstairs. "Tufty, come down and meet young Harry Potter! I've been showing him lots of pictures of you!"

The cat refused to budge, maintaining its silent vigil for what seemed like hours. The room grew darker as day turned into night and still, the blasted thing stayed right where it was. And then at long last, Lily heard footsteps on the stairs, followed by Harry's grumpy voice.

"Get out of here. I've seen enough cats to last a lifetime." Harry paused, letting out a heavy sigh. 'Don't want to leave? Well, all right then, but at least get off the bed. I want to go to sleep.' Another long pause, and then he said, "Come on, get down. Shoo!"

The room was silent for a moment, and then she heard him stomp over to the bed, followed by a yowl of outrage as the cat was unceremoniously dumped on the floor. She felt like cheering... at least until she realized what he was about to do next.



*Oh no, Harry, don't...*

It was too late. He stuck his hand in the bag, pulling out various items of clothing in search of his pajamas. Lily tried to burrow deeper, but without warning, she was out in the open, clinging to a sweater as Harry dropped it on the floor.

And then the cat was on her, trapping her tail beneath a massive paw, gazing down at her with a malevolent gleam in its huge yellow eyes. Completely oblivious, Harry pulled on a pair of ragged sweatpants as she stared into the face of certain death... again.

Refusing to cower, Lily gazed directly into the creature's eyes in a futile attempt at intimidation. For several long moments, neither of them moved... and then it happened. A connection formed, as primal as the earth itself, as she invaded Tufty's mind. She could feel it like a tangible object, a hollow pocket just beside the place where the animal's spirit resided, and a thrill shot through her. She recognized it for what it was, eerily similar to the space she'd occupied for the past five years.

It felt like the most logical thing in the world as she willed herself to reach for that place. She drifted along upon a familiar wave of blackness and then stopped with a jolt, opening her eyes to a brand new existence.

Staring down at her previous form, she felt sorry for the tiny mouse that was shivering in fear now that it no longer had her foolhardy courage to bolster its resolve. Ignoring the overwhelming instinct to devour it whole, she lifted her paw from its tail, watching in amazement as it scampered away.

She was captivated by this new version of herself — sleek and powerful, a creature of beauty and grace. Stretching luxuriously, she opened her mouth to yawn, then vocalized her approval with a loud meow. Still far from human, but infinitely better than a rodent. Smiling on the inside, she meowed again.

"Shut up, will you?" Harry tossed a pillow in her direction, smacking her upside the head. She wanted to laugh in delight... he knew she was there... he was actually *speaking* to her! Of course, he had no idea who she was, but what did it matter? For the first time since Voldemort had cursed her, she didn't have to hide.

Without further thought, she jumped up on the bed. Oh my, she was so strong now, able to leap effortlessly and land with perfect balance. She didn't even mind when Harry shoved her right back off again, happy to have another excuse to make one of those mighty leaps.

She made four or five attempts before he finally relented, flopping over with an exasperated sigh as she cuddled up beside him and started to purr. She wasn't even aware of the sound she was making at first. The warmth of him, the sound of his soft breathing pulled it out of her, an instinctive reaction that would've emerged as a murmur of contentment in human form.

After a moment, his hand slid over the top of her head, fingers scratching her gently behind the ears. "Wretched thing," he muttered in a groggy voice, then closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

“Aha! Here she is!” Arabella announced as Lily followed Harry into the kitchen. “Where have you been all night, sweet girl? My, you must be hungry! You too, Harry. Go on over there and fix yourself a plate.”

The platter of strong smelling fish should’ve been disgusting. Lily had eaten nothing but baked goods for years, had been repulsed by the odor of animal products. But that was nothing more than a distant memory as she devoured the plateful of tuna, savoring every mouthful like she hadn’t eaten in weeks.

After that, she reclined on the windowsill, dozing in the warm sunshine as she listened to Arabella describe the lineage, personality, and basic traits of what must have been dozens of felines. That became the routine for the next two weeks — breakfast, cats, lunch, more cats, dinner, followed by a long talk about cats, until Arabella finally took mercy on Harry and sent him off to bed.

At least she wasn’t mean to him, even if her endless droning bored him to tears. She fed him well, picked up after him, and washed his clothes without complaint. Lily even caught her watching him sometimes, her face soft and gentle, a touch of sadness in her eyes. Granted, she was terrible at keeping him entertained, but that was obviously a matter of ignorance, not out of any wish to see him unhappy.

Lily’s life was positively idyllic over the course of that fortnight. She began to crave monotony as much as Harry resented it, content to spend her time eating, sleeping, and grooming herself at regular intervals. At first, she worried about the other cats, but they were as lazy as she was, happy to ignore her as long as she extended the same courtesy.

All was well until the day Vernon Dursley appeared on Arabella’s doorstep, informing her that he’d come to take the boy home. Too late, Lily recognized her dilemma, complacency giving way to a rush of panic.

Trying to follow in their footsteps was pointless, but she attempted it anyway, yowling in helpless frustration as she was scooped up and carried back inside.

“Got quite attached to little Harry, didn’t you, Tufty?” Arabella cooed as she shut the door and slid the chain into place. “Don’t worry… I’m sure he’ll be back to visit sooner or later.”

## 9. Witchcraft and Wizardry

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### Chapter 9: Witchcraft and Wizardry

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Lily had never been separated from Harry for more than a few hours, nor had she slept through a single night without knowing he was in close proximity.

Before Voldemort, she'd made a habit of getting up in the wee hours to check on her baby, lingering beside his crib to caress his velvety cheek or listen to his soft breathing. And in the years since, her tiny size had allowed her to stay close to him at all times.

Now she had no idea what to do with herself, only that she had to get back to him as soon as possible. She tried to escape several times, bolting past Mrs. Figg whenever the front door opened, even attempting to squeeze through a gap in the window. But that had only gotten her shut away in one of the upstairs bedrooms, where she expressed her frustrations through loud mewling and clawing the furniture.

She only put a stop to her bad behavior when Arabella threatened to send her away. The last thing she needed was an even greater separation from Harry.

After that, she spent most of her time staring out the window, either worrying about her son or preoccupied with things that would've never crossed her mind when she'd been human. Instinctive urges plagued her constantly, tempting her to chase shadows on the wall or track every movement of the tiny creatures she heard stirring in the foliage outside.

Life as a mouse had been easier in many ways. She'd been small enough to go anywhere she pleased, completely self-reliant when it came to necessities like food and water. Now she had to depend on a human for her most basic needs — feeding, changing litter pans, even opening doors. She wished she could appreciate Arabella for these things, but she was too frustrated to care.

One morning, she was perched in her usual spot, dozing beneath a brilliant beam of sunlight. Her ears picked up on the softest noise, her eyes cracking open to gaze at the robin that had just landed on the windowsill. Unperturbed by her presence, it puffed out its fluffy red chest, cocking its head to stare at her with beady eyes. She studied the creature intently, feeling a surge of hope as she found what she was looking for. Yes, that little hollow was there. Could she make another switch? Would it even work with birds?

Taking a deep breath, she maintained eye contact, willing herself forward. And just like that, she was free.

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Confident now, Lily was determined to use her newly discovered ability to maximum advantage. Unfortunately, there was little she could do where the Dursleys were concerned,

other than subjecting them to as many inconveniences as possible. But in her own ways, she'd do what she could to make Harry's childhood more bearable.

When she returned, it was in the form of a tiny brown spider. She revealed herself to Harry with a great deal of trepidation, not sure whether he'd smash her or recoil in horror. But there in that lonely little cupboard, he looked down at her with a crooked smile, greeting her as a friend.

Changing forms was easy after that. When the boys were eight, Dudley convinced his parents to get him a puppy, giving Lily a chance to frolic with her son when no one else was paying attention. And after Dudley fell asleep at night, she'd sneak downstairs, snuggling up beside Harry as he murmured sleepily in the darkness.

As careful as she was though, it soon became obvious that the puppy preferred Harry. Even when she wasn't inhabiting the little creature, it would seek him out, ignoring Dudley altogether. This led to the worst tantrum she'd ever seen, followed by a hasty advertisement in the paper.

But still, there were other things she could do. Inhabiting Marge's bulldogs was one of her favorites — she'd go out of her way to be friendly toward Harry, just for the pleasure of watching the woman seethe in frustration. And while there wasn't much she could do to prevent Dudley's constant bullying, she *did* manage to intervene here and there — a stinging wasp, a pigeon that defecated on the boy's head, whatever it took to give Harry time to escape.

All in all, their lives were relatively uneventful... until the first owl arrived.

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Vernon was delusional.

Of course, he hated anything having to do with magic. Lily had always known that. But no matter how he felt about it, there was nothing he could do to stop the letters. Any sane person would've figured that out by now, but no... he'd brought his family to this miserable shack, stranded in the middle of nowhere on a tiny island offshore. Lily had managed to come along as well, disguising herself as a shiny black beetle and clinging to one of Harry's shoe laces.

Didn't Vernon realize that he was only delaying the inevitable? Idiot. The others were cold, hungry, frightened, but did he give a damn? No! And on top of everything else, he'd bought a gun... a *gun*, for crying out loud! What was he planning to do — shoot someone for trying to send Harry a letter?

Apparently so. He cradled the weapon like a beloved child, ignoring Petunia when she begged him to put it down and come to bed.

The loud, persistent knocking started just at midnight, at the exact moment Harry turned eleven years old. Lily wasn't afraid, even though the entire structure shuddered beneath the onslaught. She could sense it somehow... the presence of someone safe and familiar on the other side of the door.

"Who's there?" Vernon bellowed. "I warn you — I'm armed!"

Not perturbed by the threat, Hagrid burst into the shack, causing each of the Dursleys to shrink back in horror as he towered over them all. Meanwhile, Harry didn't look the least bit frightened, merely curious.

"And here's Harry! Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby. Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got your mum's eyes."

With that, the curiosity in Harry's expression gave way to excitement, which threatened to turn into disappointment as Vernon ordered Hagrid to leave. But of course, the giant hadn't come all this way for nothing. Lily knew he was here to do what the letters hadn't been able to accomplish — make sure that Harry Potter would be attending Hogwarts that year.

"Ah, Shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune."

She watched in joyful anticipation as Hagrid began to set things right in every possible way. He lit a fire, filling the shack with cheery warmth before feeding Harry a hearty meal of tea and sausages. He'd even brought her son a cake for his birthday, which was the first he'd received since he was a baby. But the best part of all was when Hagrid started to talk about Hogwarts.

Over the years, nothing had hurt Lily more than her inability to communicate with her son. How much she'd wanted him to know the truth about himself, how desperate she'd been to tell him all about the Wizarding world. It had killed her to think he might never know.

But no, the magical community hadn't forgotten him, hadn't left him to spend the rest of his life in ignorance. On the contrary, they were ready to greet him with open arms. She could've wept with relief.

The moment seemed frozen in time, Vernon's futile protests nothing more than a distant echo as Lily waited for Hagrid to speak the words... waited for him to tell Harry the one thing that would change his life forever.

And then finally...

"Harry, yer a wizard."

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Professor Snape sat at the High Table, nodding stiffly in response to Quirrell's inane babble. Another year, another deplorable excuse for a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Meanwhile, Severus himself, fully qualified and eager to teach the subject, had been passed over for the tenth year in a row.

Really, he didn't know why he bothered applying for the position anymore. Sheer obstinance? In part, yes. But he also did it to make a point. No matter how many times Dumbledore rejected his application, they both knew that no wizard was better suited to the position. Year after year, Severus could see it in the headmaster's eyes, heard that twinge of regret in his voice as he said, "I'm sorry, Severus. I've already given the position to someone else."

Was that another reason he kept trying, craving that small amount of validation? Perhaps, though his dignity would never allow him to admit to anything so pathetic, just as he'd stopped hoping that things might be different this time. He'd simply carry on as he'd always

done, filling out his application every summer. Another listing of credentials, more impressive than the last, followed by another rejection, more emphatic than the one before. Really, there was a strange sort of comfort in the ritual.

In the meantime, he had another year of Potions to look forward to, filled with countless melted cauldrons and the gross misuse of precious ingredients. There were always a few students who showed talent in the subject. But most of them were either too dimwitted to grasp the basic principles, or didn't care enough to try.

Of course, Defense Against the Dark Arts would've come with its own frustrations. Interacting with children had never been his forte regardless of the subject matter. But teaching Defense would have given him a sense of purpose, a chance to train future fighters for the coming war. That seemed far more productive than his current position, sitting around watching a bunch of snot nosed teenagers brew treatments for boils. Yes, quite a few potions would be crucial to the war effort, but most of those were N.E.W.T. level. Nearly everything up to that point seemed like a tremendous waste of time.

"... d-d-don't you think?"

"Mmm," he grunted at Quirrell, hardly glancing at the quivering idiot. His eyes were fixed on the doorway, narrowing in concentration as the first year students shuffled into the hall.

Some he recognized instantly, as they bore an uncanny resemblance to their parents. Malfoy's son was the spitting image of his father, and Crabbe and Goyle's offspring were hard to miss. There was the youngest Weasley boy, nearly identical to his brothers with his bright red hair and impudent expression. And standing beside him...

Severus froze. His insides twisted, as if crumpled into a ball only to be stretched out again. He closed his eyes, half convinced that it was some sick hallucination, but when he opened them again, there he was... the perfect replica of a young James Potter.

If the boy had looked like Lily, had inherited her sweetness, her strength and courage, Severus might've been able to forget the man who'd sired him. It still would've been painful, living with the shadow of the woman he'd lost, yet welcome as a constant reminder of what he was fighting for. Hell, if the child had taken after his mother, Severus might've even grown fond of him in his own quiet way.

He'd spent years hoping for such an outcome, far more than he'd realized, hoping to find some little piece of her that still existed in this world. Was that still possible? Not in appearance, perhaps, but...

As if sensing the unspoken question, Harry Potter chose that exact moment to glance up at Severus. In a gesture eerily reminiscent of his father, he winced, his face scrunching up in distaste as he quickly looked away. And then Severus wasn't in the present at all, but lost in memories, remembering all the times he'd been humiliated by that expression.

*"Don't worry, Prongs. There's no way Lily Evans would ever shag someone like that."*

*"Then why does she hang around him all the time?"*

*"Feels sorry for him, I'll bet. Girls are just that way sometimes. Not enough to make them drop their knickers though, you can be sure of that. Old Snivy will probably be a virgin for the rest of his life, unless he drugs some poor bird with one of his potions."*

*“You don’t think he’d do that to Lily...?”*

*“Not if we hex his shriveled little bollocks off.”*

Harry never spoke a word. He didn’t have to. Severus could read it quite clearly in his reaction. He was dismissive of the man who was destined to be his protector, perhaps even repulsed by him. Through the son, the father came back to life, along with countless reminders of a tormentor who’d looked and acted *just like that*. And then there was no chance of withholding judgment, no possibility that Severus would give him the benefit of the doubt. That one look had told him everything he needed to know.

And the one thing he knew for certain was this: he *hated* the boy.

## 10. Return to Hogwarts

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### Chapter 10: Return to Hogwarts

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Yet again, Lily found herself separated from Harry.

Switching to a dormouse she'd found hidden in Hagrid's pocket, she'd gone along on the trip to Diagon Alley. How thrilling it had been to be there, to hear the excitement in her son's voice as he'd purchased his school supplies, followed by his very first wand. Unfortunately, she'd been so caught up in the experience that she hadn't realized until the last minute that he was about to board a train. Not to Hogwarts, as she'd assumed, but back to the Dursleys.

Cursing herself for her lack of forethought, she'd scampered out into the open, hoping to slip inside one of Harry's packages without notice. But Hagrid had spotted her immediately, capturing her in a massive fist. "Where yeh goin' in such a hurry?" he'd said with a chuckle, stuffing her back in his pocket. "It's back to Hogwarts with us!"

She'd had no choice but to wish Harry a silent farewell, reminding herself that he'd be joining her in a few short weeks.

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One of the best things about Hogwarts was the abundance of creatures to be found there. Lily went from life as a dormouse to inhabiting Fang, spending a few days as the boarhound before growing restless and transferring to a little brown wren. From there, she ventured into the Forbidden Forest, ready to test the full limits of her capabilities. Ordinary animals were no challenge — deer and rabbits, birds and squirrels, even the tiny insects that inhabited the lush undergrowth. But when she tried to inhabit magical creatures — centaurs, unicorns and the like, she began to understand her limitations. Like humans, that little hollow simply didn't exist in them, leaving her no way to transfer.

After a few days, she decided that birds were her favorite, thrilled with the freedom of flight. She flew from the castle to Hogsmeade, across the lake and then back to the forest, exploring the familiar places of her childhood from a different point of view. The experience was so mesmerizing, in fact, that she didn't realize how much time had passed until the Hogwarts Express pulled into the station.

Aided by the sharp eyes of a falcon, she immediately spotted Harry, alighting nearby before switching to a tiny spider. She clung to the bottom of his robes as he made his way up to the school, shuffling into the Great Hall with the other new students.

Was he as excited as she'd been in this moment? She still remembered it vividly, how she'd barely been able to suppress her eagerness as Severus stood by with an indulgent smile. He'd kept his composure much better than she had, but his eyes had said it all, growing wide with wonder as he'd gazed at the enchanted sky above their heads.



She couldn't see the ceiling now, only countless pairs of feet. But she could hear everything, soon discovering that Harry had already made a friend. Ron Weasley? Ah, this must be Arthur and Molly's child, meaning he'd probably be sorted into Gryffindor like his parents. She hoped so, at any rate. It would be unfortunate if the boys were separated when they seemed to get along so well.

Like most students, Harry was obviously nervous as the Sorting ceremony began. She could feel him trembling, though he rose without hesitation when his name was called, making his way to the front of the hall as the crowd fell silent. That silence lingered on, seeming to last an eternity. And then finally...

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Satisfied when the room erupted into a mighty cheer, Lily was content to ignore the rest of the proceedings. Soon enough, she'd fallen asleep, unperturbed by the loud chatter and clanking of dishes around her. She only awoke when Harry rose to his feet again, grogginess giving way to breathless anticipation as she realized they were heading to Gryffindor Tower.

She was assaulted by countless memories as they made their way upstairs, growing ever stronger as they reached the Fat Lady's portrait. How many times had she passed this way, surrounded by a group of chattering friends? James and Sirius, Remus and Peter, Frank and Alice and Marlene. How young they'd been, unaware that their worlds would be torn apart in just a few short years. So much loss... how many of those friends she'd once cherished were even still alive?

Lily tried to push the dismal thought away. It was Harry's turn now. He'd be safe here, happy, free to be himself as he learned to master his abilities. This was what she'd always wanted for him, wasn't it? The dream that had sustained her through all those years of isolation. So why did she feel like crying?

But then she knew the answer. At long last, Harry was part of this world, but she wasn't. Not anymore. There would be no joyous reunions with old professors, no visits on holidays or letters home. How could there be, when everyone in the castle thought she was dead?

In some ways, perhaps they were right. She felt no magic inside her, no connection to the power that thrummed through the walls, vibrant and electric and alive. It was a cruel separation, a mockery of everything Hogwarts was supposed to be. Freedom, sanctuary, *home*. How many years had she spent longing to return to this place, convinced that when she did, her solitude would finally be over?

Foolish. She should've known better.

She'd lost so much — friends and family, marriage and home, her own body, the ability to communicate with anyone around her. The loss of her powers had seemed unimportant in comparison. But now that she was here, in a place that thrived on magic, she had no idea how she was supposed to live without it. She wanted to rage at the unfairness of it all, but even the ability to express her feelings was lost to her. Voldemort had stolen it on that fateful night... just as he'd taken everything else.

Everything? No, not quite. She still had Harry.

*My loss is his gain, she reminded herself, swallowing her grief as she gazed down at her sleeping son. I might not be here the way I'd like to be... but at least I'm here. And more importantly, so is he.*

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During that first week, Lily attended all of Harry's classes, though she soon decided this wouldn't be a frequent occurrence. He'd be fine on his own during school hours, and the frustration of sitting through Charms and Transfiguration without a wand in her hand was difficult to tolerate for long. Even so, she was glad to discover that the majority of the professors hadn't changed, with the exception of another barely competent Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor. Well, that was to be expected.

Indeed, there were no surprises whatsoever until she attended Potions.

She was hidden in the crease of Harry's collar when the tall, black clad figure came billowing into the classroom, slamming the door behind him with a resounding thud. Having assumed that Professor Slughorn would still be teaching the subject, Lily stared at Severus in disbelief as he snatched a piece of parchment from the desk and began taking roll.

He was the same and yet not, faint lines etched into the already harsh profile she remembered so well. His voice was deeper, more resonant, yet so much colder than it had once been as he glanced up between names to confirm that the student in question was present. There was no trace of emotion in his eyes, only something flat, hard and unyielding.

No, that was all wrong — Severus had given *everything* away through his eyes, whether he'd meant to or not. It was in those eyes that Lily had seen his vulnerability, his eagerness to please, had known that he really *did* have a heart, despite how hard he'd tried to hide it from the rest of the world. But now, without even a hint of that softness...

Well, no wonder his students looked terrified.

"Ah, yes," he suddenly said, his tone taking on a bitter edge. "Harry Potter. Our new — *celebrity*."

Lily's mind buzzed with questions. Why was Severus teaching at Hogwarts, when he'd always told her he disliked children? True, he was a genius at Potions, but couldn't he have gotten a job at an apothecary or something? Work as an independent researcher? That would've made a hell of a lot more sense.

Beyond that, how was this related to his status as a Death Eater? Surely Dumbledore wouldn't have given him a job here if there was any question of his loyalties, not to mention all the parents who would've been outraged. Did this mean he'd never actually gone over to the dark side? Or had he done something to redeem himself, something so powerful that no one would dare question his motives?

But none of that confused Lily as much as his attitude toward Harry. The last time she'd seen him, he'd threatened Petunia, making damn sure that the little boy would be safe in her care. So fierce, so protective... so why was he glaring at Harry like he wanted to throw a nasty hex in his direction?

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making..."

The entire room was spellbound by Professor Snape's speech. Lily was no exception. She stared at him in awe, recognizing qualities she'd only caught a glimpse of in their youth. This was Severus when he'd forgotten himself, a single-minded intensity that had both frightened and mesmerized her as a girl. Only now... this wasn't some temporary fascination he'd snap out of when he realized others were watching. This was who he'd grown up to be.

"Potter!" he snapped, making the students jump. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

*A potion he's not even supposed to learn until sixth year,* Lily thought with a flash of annoyance. *What are you trying to prove, Severus?*

"I don't know, sir," Harry admitted quietly, which was met with a sneer and a snide remark.

She was baffled by the end of class — baffled and *furious*. She'd wanted to believe that Severus merely had high expectations of his students... but the way he'd singled Harry out, deducting points for the most ridiculous reasons, made it clear that this was some sort of personal vendetta. Why? What could Harry have possibly done to offend him? To the best of her knowledge, they'd never even spoken before the lesson.

Distracted by this conundrum, she didn't notice when her son reached up to adjust his collar. Before she knew it, she was lying on the floor, dazed by the impact, and then scrambling out of the way to avoid being squashed by the hastily retreating students. By the time it was over, Harry was gone.

What was she supposed to do now? She couldn't make it all the way back to Gryffindor Tower in her current form, and the only other animals in the room were specimens suspended in sickly colored fluids. *Nice touch, Snape,* she thought sarcastically as she scaled the wall and ended up on a shelf next to a pickled pig's fetus. *Very creepy.*

Lily could've gone with one of the older Gryffindors from another class, but curiosity soon triumphed over irritation. She elected to stay in the dungeon, determined to learn more about this adult version of Severus. How had he ended up here? More importantly, why did he have a bone to pick with her son? When the last class was dismissed, she latched on to the top of his boot, ready to accompany him to his next destination and hopefully find some of the answers she was looking for.

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"Ah, Severus! Come in. Would you like some tea? Or perhaps I might tempt you with a bit of toffee?"

"Tea would be acceptable. Thank you."

"Two sugars?"

"Indeed."

Over the years, Severus had come to enjoy these meetings in Dumbledore's office, though he'd rather endure the Cruciatus than admit it aloud. He'd always respected the headmaster as a great wizard, of course, even when he'd opposed him. And throughout the decade he'd been teaching at Hogwarts, they'd formed... well, not a *friendship* exactly, but a comfortable

companionship. Certainly a welcome departure from endless days filled with mangled ingredients and exploding cauldrons.

To his initial surprise, Dumbledore had never taken him to task for his harsh teaching methods. Instead, their meetings had focused on Severus himself, on preparations for his future as Harry Potter's protector and chief spy for the Order.

Severus had welcomed the long hours of training, grateful for any opportunity to do something *useful* with his time. He strengthened his skills as an Occlumens, listened to Dumbledore's theories on the possible means of Voldemort's return. It made him feel like the war was an immediate reality, not some distant dream that might never come to pass. More than that, it kept his focus sharp, solidifying his determination to see his promise through.

Dumbledore must have understood this on some level. Severus was already an exceptional wizard — most of what they covered was so far beneath his skill level that he could have done it in his sleep. But they continued with the lessons nonetheless, perhaps both needing to feel like they were doing something meaningful with their time as they waited for the future to unfold.

It was during this training that Severus learned the most important lesson of all: the art of patience.

At first, he'd chafed at their leisurely encounters, wishing the old man would sip his fucking tea a little faster and get to the point. Now he welcomed the stillness, found comfort in their quiet companionship. Sometimes the most important communication happened without words, something he'd never fully appreciated in the past. The way Dumbledore conducted their meetings spoke of trust, respect... perhaps even a little fondness?

Whatever it was, Severus felt comfortable in Dumbledore's company, which couldn't be said for anyone else at Hogwarts. True, the other professors had warmed to him over the years, but that had been a slow, often painful process. And while they got along well enough for now, that could easily change when the Dark Lord became an immediate threat again. Would they be able to trust him? Or would he have to deal with the suspicious glances and cold formalities he'd received in the beginning?

These were the questions that haunted him, forcing him to hold himself aloof from anything beyond distant politeness with his colleagues. No one but Dumbledore knew the truth, making him the only person Severus could rely on to maintain faith in him if everything else went to hell. He simply wasn't willing to risk the crushing disappointment that might come from being close to anyone else.

It was a hellish way to live, and not always successful. Sometimes he forgot the need for distance, at least for the moment, while engaged in a friendly chess match with Minerva or chatting about silly Muggle things with Charity. But he always caught himself in time to withdraw, affecting the caustic attitude that felt much safer than saying something kind.

"So..." Dumbledore said, leaning back in his chair. "How was your first week?"

Severus snorted. "Abysmal, as usual. Isn't that question a little redundant by now?"

"Not when Harry Potter has at last come to Hogwarts."

Oh, so that was what he'd been summoned to discuss. He should have known.

“Fair enough,” he responded with a heavy sigh. “How about more abysmal than usual then?”

Dumbledore studied him carefully. “You don’t like the boy?”

“Do I like *any* of my students?”

“As a matter of fact, I think you do. You’re devoted to your Slytherins, loath as you are to admit it. And unless I’m mistaken, you were quite proud of that Ravenclaw girl who went on to work for St. Mungo’s a couple years ago. I heard you wrote her a glowing letter of recommendation. And what about...?”

Severus shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Recognizing talent, such a rare commodity in my class, has nothing to do with personal inclination. And as for my Slytherins...”

Dumbledore held up a hand, flashing him an infuriating smile. “No need to be so defensive, Severus. Let’s just get back to the subject at hand. What is it that you find so distasteful about Harry?”

“Everything.”

“Everything? From what I understand, the boy has been doing quite well in his other classes. I certainly haven’t heard any complaints where he’s concerned.”

“He’s...” Severus faltered, scowling as he searched for an answer that wouldn’t practically scream, ‘He’s too much like James Fucking Potter in every possible way. I can’t even look at him without...’

“Well, nevermind,” Dumbledore interrupted, as a visitor was announced by a sharp rap at the door. “Perhaps you’ll warm up to him in time. For now, I just wanted to make sure your personal feelings won’t interfere with what you’ve promised to do. It’s not that I doubt you, Severus, but now that you must deal with Harry on a daily basis...”

Severus rose from his chair, fixing the other man with a hard look. “I swore to protect the boy for Lily’s sake. How I feel about him is irrelevant, which is fortunate, as it is unlikely to change.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Fair enough. Have a good weekend, Severus.”

With a curt nod, Severus turned to go, flashing Minerva a wan smile as he passed her on the staircase. She looked him up and down, fixing him with that penetrating gaze that made him squirm whenever she caught him the least bit off guard. It was uncanny how Animagi seemed to take on the abilities of whatever animal they transformed into, even in their human form. Much like a tabby cat, Minerva didn’t miss even the slightest flicker of movement in her general vicinity.

She proved it now, calling after him, “Severus? There’s a spider on your shoe.”

Seeing that she was right, he bent down and plucked it off his boot. His first impulse was to smash the creature, but upon closer inspection, he realized it was a Walnut Orb-weaver. Though a fairly common species, it was one of the few he’d never had a chance to examine as a potential source for Potions ingredients. He conjured a tiny vial in which to hold it, then tucked it away in the pocket of his robes.

“Thank you, Minerva. Goodnight.”

He made his way down to the dungeons, relieved when no one stopped to speak with him along the way. More than anything, he just wanted to reach his quarters and down a healthy dose of Dreamless Sleep, hoping it would be enough to chase away the nightmares.

*“What is it that you find so distasteful about Harry?”*

Well, to start with, he hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep since the boy had come to Hogwarts.

It was easier during his waking hours, when he could remind himself that he was dealing with students, not the tormentors of his childhood. But when he fell asleep at night, unable to control the whims of his subconscious, their faces melded together so seamlessly that it was impossible to tell them apart. Harry became James himself, taunting him cruelly, searching out every weakness he could possibly use against him. The Weasley boy melted into Sirius Black, his sinister smile promising a nasty hex as soon as his back was turned. And Longbottom... well, who else could he be but Peter Pettigrew, weak and incompetent, relying on stronger wizards to take care of him?

Hermione didn’t trouble him at first, though that changed when she solidified her friendship with the other Gryffindors. After that, she was a wild-card in his dreams... sometimes she became Remus Lupin, reasonably intelligent in her own right, yet happy to claim ignorance wherever her friends were concerned. But worse than that was when she transformed into Lily, choosing to keep company with his tormentors rather than giving him another chance.

Severus couldn’t take the potion every night. Like most substances, magical or otherwise, it was highly addictive with extended use. He limited himself to weekends only, spending his weeknights roaming the corridors until his body was too exhausted to remain conscious any longer. It became a pattern — a couple hours of fitful, nightmare ridden sleep during the week, followed by sleeping like the dead on Saturdays and Sundays.

If anyone noticed the darkening circles under his eyes, they said nothing. Severus carried on as usual, keeping a sharp eye on Potter, determined to protect the unwitting source of his nightly torment.

“It’ll be over soon,” he reassured himself, his conviction growing stronger as he began to suspect that his former master was behind the sinister changes in Professor Quirrell. “It will all be over soon.”

## 11. Upon Closer Inspection

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### Chapter 11: Upon Closer Inspection

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Trapped in Severus's pocket, Lily swayed back and forth as he strode through the castle. She couldn't see where they were going, but if he believed she was a spider, it couldn't be anywhere good. Was he planning to chop her up and use her for Potions ingredients or something?

Terrified by the thought, she used her spindly legs to push against the top of the vial. It was a futile effort. Her only other hope was that she'd find another animal to switch to in time to save herself, but what if she didn't? Was she destined to die tonight, without anyone knowing she'd been alive all this time?

After what seemed like forever, Severus finally came to a stop, withdrawing the vial from his pocket and setting it on a table. Lily cringed, expecting the worst, but he merely stepped away, shedding his outer robes as he went.

Despite her fears, she gazed with interest at the sitting room, which was small and simply furnished. There was a comfortable looking armchair in front of the fireplace, which was flanked on either side by bookshelves, and a few tables scattered here and there. On the opposite wall, a pair of doors lay open to reveal a bedroom and bathroom, making it clear these were his private quarters.

It seemed odd now, but she'd never had any idea where the professors slept. The thought hadn't even crossed her mind during her school years. Perhaps that was true for most students, but she'd felt close to her teachers, particularly McGonagall and Flitwick. So why had it never bothered her that she'd known almost nothing about them? Why had she never thought to ask?

That was the hardest thing about being back at Hogwarts. It made her realize how much she'd taken for granted, how shallow most of her relationships had been. She didn't know which of her teachers had been married, where they'd spent their summers, or what they'd liked to do outside the classroom. And what about her friends? Other than Severus, who'd had little tolerance for "silly prattle", most of her conversations had revolved around weekend plans or idle gossip. Even James had rarely discussed anything meaningful with her, nor had she expected him to do so.

A depressing thought, though she had little time to dwell on it as Severus strode back into the room. He'd already removed his robes, followed by his heavy frock coat, boots and socks, leaving nothing except his trousers and a snowy white undershirt that was already half unbuttoned. She wanted to look away. Really, she did. But she couldn't help her curiosity, especially since she'd never actually seen him naked. An unfortunate flash of graying underpants once, but that was all. He'd never even taken his shirt off in her presence.

There was no trace of modesty now, though he also had no reason to believe he wasn't alone. He couldn't have known she was watching as his shirt fell apart, revealing an intriguing glimpse of bare chest. Without hesitation, he shrugged it off, draping it over a nearby chair.

Severus bore little resemblance to James, who'd had the sturdy physique of an athlete. But Lily hardly thought that was a bad thing as she admired the lean, graceful lines of his body. To her surprise, he wasn't scrawny like she'd always assumed. He was all muscle, from the subtle ridges of his abdomen to the firmness in his arms and shoulders. A bit too thin, perhaps, but that did nothing to detract from the overall impression of strength.

After a moment, he abruptly turned around, presenting her with his bare back. Her eyes widened as she stared at the scars. There were at least a dozen of them, silvery ridges standing out in sharp relief against his pale skin. Had his father done that to him? She'd known the Snape household had been a brutal place to live, even though Severus had refused to speak of it beyond the occasional vague comment. But beaten so savagely that he still had scars two decades later? How had he ever managed to hide...?

But then she lost her train of thought as he unfastened his trousers, letting them fall to the floor. There was no show of dingy underpants this time, only an appealing flash of bare backside as he bent over to pick up his clothing.

*Look away!* she told herself, but it was no use. She couldn't tear her eyes away as he turned and walked over to the table. And then there it was — the one part of him she'd never expected to see.

It was *huge!* Of course, she might not have been proportionally correct in that conclusion due to her tiny size, but that hardly mattered. All she knew was that her entire line of vision was suddenly dominated by penis. She felt mortified, but still couldn't force herself to avert her eyes, or close them, or do *anything* aside from stare in rapt fascination. Despite herself, the sight of all that naked flesh brought on a new onslaught of questions. Did he ever have sex? If so, with whom? What kind of lover was he? Was he quick and to the point as James had been? Or was he like the men in the romance novels Marlene had kept hidden in her trunk, slow and sensual, never stopping until he knew a woman was satisfied?

*Shame on you, Lily!* She tried to force her thoughts in a less explicit direction, then surrendered with a sigh of defeat. It wasn't her fault. Not really. She was still technically human, after all, and while physical cravings weren't an issue in her current form, the emotional longing was always there. To be held... to be touched... just to be close to someone again.

Still, she couldn't understand why she was feeling this way about *Severus*, of all people. He'd been her best friend, someone she would've never even *considered* becoming involved with. The very thought of it was absurd.

But then again, perhaps it wasn't. What she'd felt for him had been both bewildering and intense, especially near the end of their friendship. And while she'd sworn that their relationship was purely platonic, there was no denying there'd been an underlying attraction. That pleasant fluttering in her stomach when he'd gazed at her from across the Great Hall? Feeling irritated with him for hours whenever she'd seen him talking to another girl? The signs had been there all along, even if she'd chosen to ignore them.



Was that why it had hurt so much when she'd severed their friendship? Had she fallen in love with Severus without even realizing it? After all, hearing him shout the word "Mudblood" would've been so much worse under those circumstances, a harsh rejection of her feelings before she'd even had the chance to speak them aloud. That word had symbolized all the walls between them, obstacles he hadn't placed there by accident but through conscious choice. And in the end, lashing out at her in such a public way had told her the only thing she'd needed to know. He'd been ashamed to have her defend him, ashamed to be rescued by someone he no longer saw as an equal.

Yes, he'd broken her heart that day. But even when she'd refused his apologies, she'd thought of it as a friend's betrayal, unwilling to acknowledge it as anything more. Throughout all those nights of crying herself to sleep, followed by weeks and months of hollow sadness, she'd failed to recognize the truth.

Perhaps, in the end, it had simply been too painful to do so.

Well, it hardly mattered now. That was all in the past. Here in the present, she was in the presence of a naked and reasonably attractive man for the first time in over a decade. Naturally, that was bound to stir up certain... *desires*. But that had nothing to do with Severus himself, nor what she might have felt for him in her younger years. They were both adults now, little more than strangers. How could she have feelings for him when she didn't even *know* him anymore?

And then all rational thought fell to the wayside as a groan emerged from the bathroom, low pitched and filled with tension. She looked up, surprised to find that he'd entered the shower while she'd been lost in thought. She studied his silhouette on the curtain, noticing he was slumped forward with one hand braced against the wall. He groaned a second time and she stared at him in concern, wondering if he was hurt or ill. But then her gaze drifted lower, her eyes growing wide as she realized what he was doing.

"Mmmm..."

If she'd been in human form, she would've blushed to the roots of her hair.

His hips began to move, thrusting in perfect time with his clenched fist. Slow at first, and then he picked up speed, faster and harder until his motions were little more than a shadowed blur. He started to pant, harsh, rasping sounds that were deeply primal, filled with the desperate need for release.

*Shut your eyes, Lily. Turn around. Give the man a little privacy.*

But now more than ever, she couldn't do it. She was captivated, almost hypnotized as he continued to lose control. Besides, turning away would be pointless. She'd still be able to hear him, which seemed far more intimate somehow.

"Fuck," he half panted, half snarled, his motions even swifter now, almost brutal in their determination. And then at last, he threw his head back, shuddering from head to toe as he climaxed with a wordless cry of triumph.

He seemed stunned in the aftermath, slumped against the wall as if he needed a few minutes to recover. He wasn't the only one. Lily wasn't innocent, exactly, but she'd never seen any man seek his pleasure with that kind of intensity. James had been much more

restrained, at least with her. Sweet and gentle, sometimes a little awkward. Perhaps he'd been different on his own, locked away in the bathroom with a magazine when her advanced pregnancy had left her in no mood for sex. But somehow, she couldn't imagine him doing it as Severus had, utterly focused and with such fierce determination.

Really, if she was this impressed over a quick wank in the shower, what would it be like to...

*Stop it, Lily.*

When Severus came out of the bathroom, he was completely composed, his features fixed in the same mask of stoicism he'd worn earlier that day. His release appeared to have had no effect on him whatsoever — no softening in his expression, the tension having already returned to his body. Even as he stalked to his bedroom, discarding the towel around his waist before pulling a nightshirt over his head, his motions were guarded, as if he expected to be attacked at any moment.

Why? What had happened since she'd last seen him to make him this way?

Then again, was it really so different than before? He'd always shown a great deal of caution in his demeanor. It was only the expression of that caution that had changed. As a boy, he'd hidden behind a curtain of hair, slouching in on himself in a desperate attempt to escape notice. As a man, he faced the world with his shoulders straight and his head held high, as if daring even the most dangerous enemy to oppose him.

From the bedroom, she heard the creaking of a bed frame and a muttered "Nox", followed by silence. Nothing unusual about that. What surprised her was what happened a few minutes later, a sudden curse followed by the padding of bare feet across the floor. Severus entered the study again, looking drowsy as he headed for the table. He picked up the vial, inspecting her with a massive black eye before removing the stopper and setting her back down again.

With that, he grunted in satisfaction and went straight back to bed.

It wasn't freedom — the glass walls were still too slick for her to scale. But it was clearly an act of mercy, a conscious decision to spare her the agony of a slow suffocation, even though she was nothing more than a spider in his eyes. And for some reason, that, more than anything else she'd seen since her return to Hogwarts, told her a great deal about the man he'd become.

Attracted to him... yes, she supposed she was on some level. Not that it mattered, since she couldn't have acted on it even if she'd wanted to.

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The next day, Severus brought Lily to his private laboratory. Small yet impressive, the room was filled with expensive equipment, flanked on all sides by towering shelves that held hundreds of ingredients in carefully labeled jars. Under any other circumstances, she would've been fascinated. For the moment, however, she only felt an impending sense of doom, quite sure her time had come.

But then she was given another reprieve as a bell tinkled, followed by a muttered curse from Severus as he set her down and stormed out. He slammed the door behind him, so hard

that the vial teetered precariously on the edge of the counter before shattering all over the floor.

Lily didn't hesitate. She fled from the laboratory, passing through what appeared to be an office. Soon enough, she was back in the Potions classroom, stopping in her tracks as she came face to face with a huge, malevolent looking toad.

It was too late to escape — one flick of its tongue, and she was devoured whole.

She wasn't surprised by the darkness, nor the feeling that the world was fading away. But then she felt a shift — not painful, just disorienting for the first few seconds, before she settled into a newfound awareness. She opened her eyes in amazement, realizing the enormity of what had just happened. The toad hadn't killed her, only the spider she'd inhabited. Her soul was as safe as ever, having simply transferred to a new body.

Immortal? Not exactly. She knew she was growing older, could feel it with each passing year. But this new discovery certainly made her position less precarious, filling her with newfound hope. It meant she had a good chance of seeing Harry grow up after all... that she might even be able to help him along the way.

With this thought in mind, she spent the remainder of the school year in Gryffindor Tower, fussed over by a boy named Neville as she quietly watched over her son.

## 12. Boundaries

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### Chapter 12: Boundaries

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There was nothing Severus despised more than misplaced optimism.

He hated it so much, in fact, that his failure to banish it from his life years before Harry Potter had even come to Hogwarts struck him as downright absurd. If nothing else, any emotion within him that was even remotely hopeful should have been killed stone dead upon the realization that the boy was the living, breathing embodiment of James Potter himself, his worst nightmare resurrected right before his eyes.

Yes, he should've known to expect the worst by now... so why in the hell had he spent half the summer entertaining the notion that perhaps Potter hadn't been been *quite* as obnoxious as he remembered? And what temporary insanity had led him to the conclusion that the next bumbling fool Dumbledore hired for the Defense against the Dark Arts position would *have* to be an improvement over the insufferable Professor Quirrell?

It was no surprise to learn he'd been wrong in both cases, of course. Just a few hours back at Hogwarts and he was already itching to strangle them both. Truly, imagining that Potter in particular could be even remotely tolerable was a level of self-inflicted brainwashing that would put the *Imperius* to shame.

"Severus, you idiot," he muttered darkly, easing himself into the armchair and aiming a halfhearted *Incendio* at the cold iron grate. The fire sprang to life as he shivered and pulled his robes more tightly around his body, waiting none too patiently for the heat from the flames to reach him. Was it his imagination, or did the chill of winter creep into the castle walls just a little earlier each year?

Well, there was another remedy for that, warmth and comfort to be found in the decanter of rich amber liquid sitting on the table beside him. Severus rarely drank these days, but after the night he'd had...

Fuck it.

He filled the glass halfway, hesitated, and then filled it to the brim, tossing it back in one long swallow. The first drink was immediately followed by a second, and then a third that he sipped more slowly. Only then did he feel capable of reviewing the events of the evening without barging through the castle throwing curses in every direction.

Potter was an arrogant fool. He'd known that much already, of course, but all the boy's past shenanigans seemed positively benign compared with the ridiculous stunt involving a flying car and an incomprehensible amount of stupidity. Part of him had been thrilled. Surely even Dumbledore couldn't turn a blind eye to something so wantonly reckless. The threat of expulsion had been sweet on his tongue indeed, for even though Potter's unique circumstances might protect him, Weasley enjoyed no such privilege.

Oh yes, he'd relished the fear in their eyes, then savored thoughts of the separation to come as he'd gone to fetch Minerva. Not even noticing the rather alarmed expressions on the students's faces as he passed them with an uncharacteristically wide smile on his own, he'd marched straight up to the head of Gryffindor house and shoved the paper right under her nose.

Damn it all to hell, he should've known better.

Severus poured himself another drink, raising the glass to his lips as he stared moodily into the fire. In the end, nothing changed. To hold even the slightest hope that one of those arrogant Gryffindor shits would be suitably punished for their crimes was as pointless as trying to pluck the moon from the sky. No, whether he was a terrified student or a respected professor, it seemed there was nothing for him to do but watch helplessly as one stupid, highly dangerous act after another was swept under the rug with nothing more than a few stern words and a lousy detention. It didn't matter if the situation involved covering for a werewolf who could've easily slaughtered dozens of students, or excusing a pair of idiots who'd risked the exposure of their entire world without a second thought. Experience had proven there was nothing a Gryffindor couldn't get away with as long as Dumbledore was calling the shots.

Not for the first time, Severus found himself wondering what would've happened if Lupin had killed him after all, leaving only a mangled corpse for James Potter to present to the headmaster. Would it have made any difference? He had no doubt that Dumbledore would've felt genuine sorrow at his loss. The man wasn't heartless, after all. But would it have been enough for him to expel his precious Marauders? Or would he have come up with a neat cover that would've allowed the boys to stay at school without further penalty?

Severus pushed the thought away, realizing all over again that he didn't want to know the answer.

The bottle was nearly empty by the time he got around to addressing his other source of frustration. *Fucking Lockhart.*

Severus had always taken pride in neatly avoiding anything having to do with the numerous "fad" Wizards who became popular over the years, crediting himself with the intelligence to know the difference between the genuinely noteworthy and those who tried just a little too hard to appear so. The grinning fool who'd followed him to his laboratory without invitation earlier that evening was very much the latter — he'd known that even before he'd seen the man melt down two cauldrons in an attempt to brew something as simple as a light sleeping draught.

It was disturbing to realize that a wizard actually existed who could make Longbottom look like a competent brewer... downright excruciating to accept the fact that he'd be obligated to treat the fool as a colleague and an equal throughout the year.

"It's just as I've said a hundred times," Severus winced as he remembered the way Lockhart had clapped him on the back as if they were old chums. "Even the most talented wizard can't hope to accomplish much if he's using faulty equipment. You get yourself some better cauldrons, Severus, and we'll do this again sometime. I'll teach you the special remedy I invented to treat..."

Severus was either too tired or too drunk to remember the rest... not like he gave a fuck in any case. All he could do was curse himself for agreeing to be civil to the man, then curse Dumbledore for extracting that unfortunate promise in the first place as he rose unsteadily to his feet and began to undress for bed.

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Lily slipped through the halls like a shadow, enjoying the peaceful silence of the slumbering castle. Passing a pair of 7th years locked in an embrace behind a particularly large statue, she gave them a long, measuring look and then continued on her way. Masquerading as Filch's beloved pet might have its downsides, but the number of students given detention for being out of bed after curfew had dropped dramatically this year. That alone seemed reason enough to tolerate the caretaker's sometimes overbearing affections.

Of course, she really wanted to be in Gryffindor Tower with her son, inhabiting the toad who'd become surprisingly comfortable during the previous year. It wasn't so simple this time around though, something she'd discovered on their first night back when she'd tried to transfer from a very ruffled Hedwig to the Weasley boy's rat. She didn't like the creature — it was tremendously ugly and carried a very strange smell. But it was the simplest way to make sure she'd be carried to the boy's dormitory, and so she'd resolved to endure it until she was brought close enough to switch back to Trevor.

What she *hadn't* expected was to meet resistance when trying to make a switch that had become as natural to her as breathing. An unseen presence had pushed back against her almost violently, the breadth and size of it somehow enormous compared with the cowering rodent it appeared to be. Lily was left feeling bewildered, and truth be told, more than a little frightened. None of the animals she'd ever inhabited had shown even the slightest hint of being aware of her presence. They'd certainly never reacted the way Scabbers had.

She'd eventually made it to her destination in the guise of a common housefly, narrowly managing to switch to Trevor before being swallowed whole. Not that that would have caused her any harm, of course, but it was an unpleasant sensation she'd just as soon avoid whenever she could help it. All had seemed well for the next couple days... until the rat had started sniffing around whenever she was in close proximity. Why? They'd coexisted quite peacefully the year before, mostly by ignoring each other. But now...

Scabbers, or whoever was pretending to be the rat, obviously knew something wasn't right. She'd given herself away when she'd tried to transfer herself to him, and now he recognized her presence, even in another form. But by what, exactly? Sight? Smell? Or was it just the subtle feeling that *something* was different about her, a peculiar sensation she'd overlooked in the past where he was concerned as well?

Was it someone like her then, the essence of a human soul trapped in animal form? If so, who was it and how had they come to find themselves in such a predicament? And why did they seem equal parts hostile and terrified whenever she was near?

Cautiously, she'd approached the mangy rodent late one night, putting all her energy into projecting soothing thoughts his way. *Please, I mean you no harm. Who are you? Are you human?*

What happened after that had resulted in a hysterical Neville Longbottom racing to the hospital wing with a bleeding toad cradled in his chubby hands. Madame Pomfrey had been able to repair the scratches easily enough, but one thing had been clear — inhabiting poor Trevor would be nothing short of a death sentence under current circumstances. And since all the other boys owned owls who never came near the dormitories, she'd decided to transfer to an animal who had free reign of the castle and was large enough to defeat Scabbers in a fight if it came to it.

But what to do after switching to Mrs. Norris? She wasn't comfortable with the idea of killing the rat, especially since she didn't know what the presence inside of him actually *was*. And if it were someone like her, it wouldn't do any good anyway — he'd just transfer to a different body.

Lily was so tired of her limited abilities, fed up with always having new reasons to worry about her son without being able to do anything about it. Gathering information was all she could do and even that was useless. After all, who was there to pass along the information to once she had it?

She sought it out anyway for lack of anything better to do, prowling up and down the halls and poking her head in where it wasn't wanted — which was everywhere, with the exception of Filch's office.

That was how only a few nights later, she came upon the biggest and most dangerous secret to be found in Hogwarts. And it would be another eight months before she awoke to the realization that she'd never known until that moment what it meant to be *truly* helpless.

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Halloween.

It wasn't enough that it was Severus's least favorite day of the year. Oh no, the universe wasn't content to allow him to slip off to his quarters so he might be haunted by the ghosts of his past in peace. Whether a mountain troll or a petrified cat, something just *had* to come along to fuck with his already fragile grasp on sanity. And naturally, that *something* had to involve Potter and his insufferable little friends.

He didn't believe the trio of bewildered Gryffindors were responsible for the attack on the cat, of course. None of them except perhaps Granger were even remotely capable of that level of advanced magic, and he'd never detected any trace of cruelty in the girl. She might be exceedingly annoying with her relentless questions, and he'd often wondered if mental illness ran in her family due to her choice of friends, but the type to harm a defenseless animal? Certainly not.

Still, they were up to *something*. Potter in particular seemed incapable of refraining from sticking his nose where it didn't belong, and Severus would happily seize on any opportunity to bring this fact to the headmaster's attention. Part of it was purely for his own gratification — the slightest excuse to wipe that smug, self-satisfied expression off the boy's face was well worth the effort. But on a more practical level, it would certainly make his own job significantly easier if certain privileges were restricted. It wasn't only spite that led him to suggest suspension from the Quidditch team — if the previous year had proven anything, it

was that extracurricular activities set the boy up as a prime target for those who wished to do him harm.

As usual, Dumbledore refused to even take the idea under consideration when he brought it up again later, blathering on and on about the importance of a “normal” childhood and the necessity of learning from one’s own mistakes. He couldn’t remember exactly what was said after that, having chosen that moment to stop giving a rat’s ass about anything except helping himself to the last chocolate biscuit on the tea tray. It was the second Halloween in a row that Harry Potter had been responsible for him missing his supper.

“I understand how you feel, Severus, but you must trust my judgment on this. Young Harry has much to discover about himself and the world around him before he’ll be ready to face...”

“And if he gets himself killed in the process?” Severus retorted sourly. He wasn’t in the habit of interrupting the headmaster, but on this night of all nights, he wasn’t in the mood to be placated.

“He’s stronger than you think, capable of far more than we even know just yet. We must have faith in...”

“In a 12-year-old boy?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said simply.

“Put our faith in a 12-year-old boy who has already proven himself to be lazy, arrogant, reckless to the point of stupidity...”

“Yes, Severus. That is what we must do.”

“Then I guess we’re all fucked.”

“*Severus!*”

“Forgive me, Headmaster.” He rose gracefully to his feet and bowed his head respectfully, not truly contrite but simply too weary to debate the issue any longer. “It has been a trying night.”

The old man gave him long, searching look before nodding as if he’d come to some satisfying conclusion. “Indeed it has. Get some sleep, Severus. I have a feeling we’re all going to need it in the weeks to come.”

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Unsurprisingly, Dumbledore was right. But then again, so was Severus.

Two weeks later, the heated rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor quickly became a far more sinister game as a rogue Bludger set its sights on Potter with the obvious intention of knocking him straight out of the sky. The Potions master was extremely disgruntled in the aftermath, not the least of his reasons being that he was forced to admit (if only to himself) that the boy’s more than adequate flying abilities had probably saved his life. A broken arm was the worst of it, but still...



Still, it should have never happened in the first place, and as usual, there wasn't a single person in the entire bloody castle who'd listen to him where anything involving Harry Potter was concerned. Each of them would assume some ulterior motive — jealousy, spite, an attempt to advance his own House. Not that those things weren't a factor, of course, but they came in at a distant second to his primary motivation, the central reason for his growing bitterness.

He wanted to trust Dumbledore. In many ways, he did... far more than he trusted anyone else, at least. And he'd been assured on more than one occasion that that trust ran both ways.

So why had he been tasked to protect the boy, and yet refused the ability to do so properly? It was *his* responsibility to ensure that Potter came to no harm, and yet any suggestion he offered that might contribute to that protection was completely disregarded, often accompanied by some infuriatingly cryptic remark that inevitably left him wondering if Dumbledore's grand strategy would turn out to be nothing more than throwing the boy to the wolves and hoping for the best. After all, it *would* be a very Gryffindor thing to do.

It was maddening, perhaps even worse than dealing with Potter himself. No planning, no well thought out strategies to ensure maximum protection at all times. No careful tutelage in the defensive tactics that would surely be needed if it came to open conflict. Oh no, just stick him with a frothing idiot like Lockhart as the only means of learning how to protect himself, then allow him to roam around as he pleased with an unseen menace on the loose. Brilliant approach, truly.

The rest of the year was an exercise in similar frustrations, though there was some small consolation in the formation of the Dueling Club. It had been far too long since he'd been given the opportunity to knock someone flat on their ass, and he couldn't think of a more worthy candidate than Lockhart. Unfortunately, the moment had been ruined by the man's insufferable ego. If he hadn't sworn up and down to Dumbledore that he'd behave, he'd have had a set of blindingly white teeth as a souvenir. But no... he'd just have to make the most out of that dazed, almost fearful expression he'd glimpsed just before Lockhart had recovered what little wits he possessed and climbed to his feet.

After that, the mysteries piled up like so many broken dreams, each seeming more impossible to reconcile than the last. Potter was a Parselmouth? That alone was worth more than a few sleepless nights. Students were being petrified left and right, sometimes even in broad daylight, without a shred of evidence to point to any logical source. Not Potter... it would take a hell of a lot more than some admittedly unusual talent to lead Severus to the conclusion that the boy had anything to do with the Chamber of Secrets or any of this foolish business about Slytherin's heir. But who then? Draco? No... young Malfoy might have the ego to proclaim himself as such, and he'd certainly been raised with a deep disdain for Muggle-borns. But he possessed neither the skill or the single-minded viciousness to pull off something like this. Not yet... not *ever* if Severus had anything to say about it.

Again and again, his mind kept returning to the same inevitable conclusion: *The Dark Lord is behind this.*

Yes, the signs couldn't be ignored, however reticent Dumbledore might be whenever he voiced this concern. All he could do was wait, mitigate the damage wherever possible, and

hope that unlike last year, he'd actually be around to fulfill his promise to protect the boy when the truth was finally revealed.

Of course, he wasn't. Another peculiar scheme on the headmaster's part, another narrow escape for Potter, and it was all over.

He should have known by now that it was pointless to hope for a particular outcome. Well, lesson learned. The days were growing darker, and he'd be damned if he was going to sit by any longer, passively waiting for the next dire threat to reveal itself. He would be on Potter like the boy's own shadow from this moment on... hating every minute of it, no doubt, but he would *be there*. And the next time, death or survival wouldn't depend on a stroke of luck and a few well-placed magical artifacts. No, Severus himself would provide that buffer, and Merlin help anyone who dared to stand in his way.

With that thought in mind, Severus decided that a trip to Little Whinging was long overdue.

## 13. The Silent Companion

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### Chapter 13: The Silent Companion

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As it turned out, Severus didn't go straight to Little Whinging at the onset of the summer holidays like he'd planned. A last minute invitation from the Malfoys insisted he join them at their chateau in the south of France instead, and he couldn't think of any reason not to accept the offer. After all, he might end up being privy to crucial information that would aid him in the boy's protection, and at any rate, passing time with friends was certainly better than spending the summer alone.

Friends? The thought gave him pause as he absently shrunk his scant luggage and tucked it away in his pocket. Well, perhaps that wasn't *quite* the right word for his relationship with the Malfoys. What he felt toward Lucius in particular was one of the many strange dichotomies in his life — genuine fondness undercut by the ever present realization that he'd have no choice but to destroy the other wizard if he chose to side with the Dark Lord again, which was more or less inevitable.

Caring for his enemies while despising most of his allies had a way of setting Severus at odds with himself, opening him up to an impossible tangle of loyalties he didn't know where to begin to sort out. It was only when he remembered that men like Lucius, no matter how charming or pleasant they might be, supported a monster who was responsible for the death of the only woman he'd ever loved that he was able to put his personal feelings aside and focus on what needed to be done. Whatever slight twinge of affection he might feel from time to time was irrelevant — a minor inconvenience, nothing more.

And so he went to France, where he enjoyed Lucius's fine cigars and elf made wine and managed to tolerate Narcissa's usual incessant meddling in his affairs. Yes, he was aware that he was too skinny and no, he didn't need another helping of roast beef, thank you very much. No, he wasn't seeing anyone, and yes, he was quite aware that he wasn't getting any younger.

And then of course, came his favorite part of all:

"Severus, I know you said you're not interested in a date, but Mirabella would be just *perfect* for you. Don't you agree, my love? Lucius?"

"Yes, dear."

As usual, Narcissa never noticed the sympathetic look her husband directed at their beleaguered guest. She chattered on happily, pointing out that they had few obligations this year, what with Draco away on a tour of the continent, and wouldn't it be just lovely to put together a small dinner party tomorrow night where Severus might make Mirabella's acquaintance?

There was no way of getting around it without causing offense. Severus had played the "sudden emergency back at Hogwarts" card just a little too frequently for it to be a plausible

excuse anymore. He would simply have to endure the evening, fortified by copious amounts of wine and the fervent hope that this supposedly perfect choice would be more tolerable than the last one. Damned if he could remember the woman's name, but Lucius had snorted scotch from his nose in a very undignified manner when Severus had discreetly questioned whether or not she had a hag in her family tree.

But when he joined the Malfoys for dinner the following night, he found himself seated directly across from a petite witch with a head full of messy blonde curls and large, inquisitive brown eyes. She wasn't what he might've called beautiful — few came remotely close to the standards he'd defined for himself after laying eyes on Lily Evans for the first time. Despite that, however, looking at her didn't leave him with the immediate urge to gouge his eyes out, which was more than he'd allowed himself to hope for when dealing with one of Narcissa's matchmaking schemes.

What was more surprising was that unlike her predecessors, Mirabella remained fairly tolerable throughout the evening. True, she had a tendency to laugh when the commentary wasn't remotely funny and express her confusion when it was downright hilarious, but little details like that could be forgiven while in an unusually generous mood. And as the wine kept flowing and the room grew a little hazy, Severus forgot all about his disdain for women who showed no interest in academia or how much he was annoyed by idle gossip.

It had been too long... so long that he'd clearly taken leave of his senses, which was why he awoke the following morning with a splitting headache and vague memories of a soft mouth wrapped around his cock. Had he...? No, certainly not. All he remembered was an almost immediate release, followed by the overpowering urge to fall asleep and remain that way for at least several days. Well, perhaps that was for the best. Severus was only human, after all, and the occasional casual encounter was a necessity. But the last thing he needed was to become entangled in a situation that demanded more from him than he was willing to give. Love, romance, commitment... any hope that he was capable of such things was long dead, right along with the only person he'd ever wanted to offer them to.

Cautiously optimistic, he wondered if he might be able to slip away without alerting the softly snoring lump of blankets beside him. He eased out of bed and reached for his underpants, then swore softly as an empty glass tumbled from the blankets and shattered on the hardwood floor. Dammit, he should've known better — the fates were far too malicious to allow for an easy escape.

"Good morning!"

*Fuck.*

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Which was more annoying — the insufferable woman who practically sat in his lap during breakfast? Or Narcissa relaxing across the table, beaming at them both with an expression of supreme satisfaction plastered on her face? Severus couldn't decide. All he knew was that the isolation of his dingy sitting room back in Spinner's End seemed infinitely less depressing than it had just a week ago. Was there any possibility he might make his excuses and return to England a bit earlier than he'd planned? The one thing he'd hoped for in coming to France — some time alone with Lucius where drink might loosen his tongue — hadn't happened, nor

was it likely to given current circumstances. What an idiot he'd been, encouraging the empty headed bint rather than shutting her down as he should have done. He sighed heavily to himself as he listened to the women chatter on about a tour of the city, along with an outing to some fancy restaurant that frankly, sounded rather nauseating. No, there was no way Narcissa was letting him out of her clutches just yet... not when she believed herself successful after years upon years of miserable matchmaking failures.

And so with no viable means of escape in sight, he eventually decided upon a strategy that had never failed him in the past. He was cold, standoffish, condescending, even openly insulting as the days passed and the increasingly intolerable Mirabella refused to let him out of her sight. It was all for nothing — the more he tried to push her away, the more determined she was to be close to him, completely oblivious to his genuine loathing as she cooed over his foul tempers and giggled in response to his sharp retorts. Only Narcissa saw the truth of it, shooting him harshly disapproving glances and urging him to “Relax, Severus. Stop being so critical and give her a chance.”

Personally, he couldn't see the point. Maybe the others saw him as rigid and uncompromising — he'd overheard Narcissa murmuring something to that effect to Lucius one night, who was desperately trying to remain uninvolved. But whatever their opinions of him might be, why should he go out of his way to encourage a woman who he knew for a fact was completely wrong for him in every possible way?

Of course, there was one exception, the only time he welcomed Mirabella's presence rather than doing his damndest to turn her away. Late at night with alcohol softening the edges of his consciousness, alone in a strange bed, he simply didn't have the strength to resist the warm, willing body that slipped beneath the covers and nestled up beside him. He didn't see where the experience could have been that pleasurable for her, as he took her with all the mindless desperation of a man who knew much more than was healthy about the pain of self-denial.

And yet she returned night after night, moaning her encouragement whenever he settled himself between her thighs and pushed his way inside her with a great deal of hunger and little finesse. There was no emotion in the act, no traces of tenderness or anything beyond pure physical need — after the fact was always when the conflicted feelings began to surface, a strange mishmash of guilt and shame, and then a strange sort of gratitude coupled with contempt for a woman who seemed to value herself so little that she couldn't bring herself to demand anything more than the pathetic scraps he threw her way.

And then one night in late June, fate threw him a bone in the midst of a summer he'd been beginning to fear would be wasted upon meaningless sex interspersed with the idle pursuits of the rich and useless. It was Mirabella herself, of all people, who unknowingly presented him with just the kind of opportunity he was waiting for.

“Lucius,” she said in that wheedling tone of hers that made the wail of a banshee seem like a lullaby. ‘What happened to the House-elf you used to have?’ She paused to shoot a contemptuous look at the ancient creature who'd accidentally splashed a couple drops of wine on her robes. “Robby, was it? Much more efficient than this one, to be sure.”

“Dobby,” Lucius responded in a tight voice, and it was then that Severus saw it — a glimpse of pure malevolence in the otherwise mild gray eyes. Feigning nonchalance, he

leaned back in his chair and took a long drink of scotch.

Mirabella was oblivious to the subtle shake of Narcissa's head, silently beseeching her to drop the subject. "Did he die?"

"No." Lucius drained his glass, slamming it down on the table before he continued. "He was... released from my service."

"But why would you do that? Good servants are hard to come by, you know. Why, just last week, I was at the Rosewoods, and you wouldn't *believe*..."

Severus couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his friend so furious. Perhaps Lucius might have concocted a plausible lie if he'd been more in control of his temper... or sober... or better prepared for the line of questioning. In the end, the answer he gave was obviously the truth, both humiliating and far more informative than Severus could've hoped for. Apparently Potter himself had been responsible for the elf's freedom, and even with his own loathing to contend with, Severus grudgingly admitted to himself that it was cleverly done. Indeed, he couldn't help wishing he'd been there to see the look on Lucius's face at the moment of realization.

More importantly though, that meant Lucius now had a personal vendetta against the boy, and for all his refinement and seemingly mild manners, he was a dangerous enemy to have. He'd have to be watched closely from that moment on, Severus realized, a conclusion that only grew stronger as the conversation continued.

"The cheek of it!" Mirabella exclaimed in outrage. "I would've hexed him to the moon and back!"

Lucius scowled, his eyes unfocused as he stared off into the distance. "It would've been... ill-advised under the circumstances. But someday..." And then, as if suddenly recalling the necessary caution that came with being Lucius Malfoy while remaining out of Azkaban, he smiled and changed the subject. "My dear, didn't you receive another letter from Draco today? Perhaps you can read it aloud for us."

Letters... Severus reluctantly agreed to write to a clearly devastated Mirabella when the time came to return to England just a couple weeks later. He knew he'd never keep his word, just as he was convinced that she was likely to attach herself to the next unfortunate wizard who came along just as soon as he was out of sight. Such was always the way with women who invested so much in a man while receiving so little in return... or at least, that's what he told himself in order to alleviate whatever guilt he might have felt otherwise. That was an emotion he'd experienced far too much of in his lifetime, certainly not one to be wasted on someone who meant nothing to him.

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It was storming violently when the thin, black clad figure appeared in a deserted alleyway with a soft "pop." He was only about a mile from Little Whinging, and as far as he was concerned, the downpour was exactly what he needed. The cold water ran down his face in rivulets, plastering his already limp hair to his skull and soaking through his thick woolen robes until he shivered despite the warm summer night.

It was a welcome sensation, cleansing, washing away all traces of the dull-witted indolence that had marked his time in France. He was on full alert again, seeking, hungry, ready to swoop down on all possible threats or take advantage of the first opportunity to do... *something*. It didn't matter what it was –anything that made him feel a little less useless would be more than acceptable.

He kept to the shadows as he neared his destination, though there was really no need. The streets were deserted at such a late hour, and the area was far too respectable to invite the routine patrols one might expect in a rougher neighborhood. Number 4 Privet Drive looked exactly the same as all the other houses, right down to the carefully tended flower beds and the nice, but not too fancy automobile that was parked in the driveway. Severus rolled his eyes, hard put to think of anything more pathetic than Muggles's incessant need to imitate one another. It had always been beyond his comprehension, going way back to the first time he'd ever encountered Petunia Evans and her endless obsession with being "normal."

Well, she'd gotten the perfectly ordinary life she'd always dreamed of, the very definition of mediocrity all wrapped up in a bland little house shared with an appropriately dimwitted husband and son. Not that Severus had ever met the other Dursleys, of course, but it was easy enough to come to the conclusion that no man with even the smallest measure of intelligence would've willingly shackled himself to Petunia for the rest of his life.

For a moment, it was nearly impossible to resist the temptation to stir up a little trouble — turning the house purple, perhaps, or maybe transfiguring the vehicle in the driveway to resemble a parade float. Hell, if he could stomach the implications involved, however fictitious, it might even be amusing to present himself as some sort of long-lost lover, just to see the horror on Petunia's face as he shattered her carefully cultivated reputation. Oh yes, he'd missed out on a lot over the years (thankfully), but he certainly knew enough to pull off a convincing deception if he were so inclined. The things he could say...

He did nothing, of course, other than secluding himself in a small cluster of trees in preparation for what was to become a nightly vigil. The waiting wasn't a problem... he was exceptionally good at waiting. But it was impossible to say what exactly it was he was waiting for now that he'd actually arrived. Did he expect Death Eaters to come jumping out of the bushes? Or perhaps to see Lucius strolling up the street with a polite smile and thoughts bent on vengeance?

It seemed silly now, and yet he was compelled to stay by the simple need to be doing *something* more than nothing, driven by the urge to act upon his own instincts rather than blindly following orders only to discover after the fact just how much had been concealed from him. He needed to feel in control on some level, particularly in light of the growing unease he'd been feeling for the past couple years.

The dark days were coming... when, where, or how exactly he couldn't say, but they were coming. There was no way to prepare for the unknown, of course, but just the facade of doing so was comforting on some deeper level Severus didn't quite understand. And so he waited through one uneventful night after another, with nothing to break the stillness other than the wind whistling through the trees. He Apparated home when the sky began to lighten, only to awaken the next evening and do the same thing all over again.

He grew complacent in his nightly ritual, so accustomed to the serene atmosphere of the quiet suburban street that he nearly hexed the damned bird when it dropped from the trees to settle beside him. It wasn't the first time he'd seen the creature — he often glanced at what must've been Potter's window to find one round yellow eye gazing back at him in what could only be described as open curiosity. But to finally approach him... he must've satisfied some bizarre animal prerequisite for trustworthiness or something of that nature.

"What do you want?" he demanded, his voice stern but not unkind. Animals didn't bother him so much — it was people who had a way of getting under his skin.

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but for a moment, he could've sworn the bird desperately wanted to speak with him in the way it opened its mouth, then closed it again with a shake of its head that struck him as almost frustrated. Unusual creatures, owls... far more intelligent than most creatures, perhaps sometimes even too smart for their own good. And this one... there was something about its eyes that could almost be described as human.

Tentatively, he reached out and stroked the soft white feathers, almost smiling when the owl closed its eyes in pleasure and sidestepped a little closer. It was a beautiful animal, far too fine for the likes of Potter in his opinion. But when he expressed this thought aloud, it was met with a sharp nip on the back of his hand, hard enough to draw blood. Stifling a curse, he scowled at the bird.

"Another defender of our precious Potter," he sneered. "I should hate you on principle."

He couldn't bring himself to do it, however, nor did he shoo the owl away. He'd be the last to admit it, of course, but he rather enjoyed the company, even began to look forward to it as the days passed. And if he stopped by Diagon Alley and just so happened to pick up a bag of treats while replenishing his ingredients stores, well, that was just to make sure the miserable creature didn't bite him again. It was a poor excuse — unless he said something disparaging about Potter, she (a convenient little spell had determined that one) was just as sweet as she could be.

It was uncanny how much she seemed to understand, so much that he found himself conversing with her while feeling less like a fool each time he did it. It was oddly comforting, giving into an honesty he wouldn't allow even when speaking with Dumbledore. And it was encouraging (if a bit insane) the way she seemed to approve of his actions, particularly when he made the comment that he was there for the boy's protection. She seemed to agree with his distaste for the Dursleys as well — he nearly woke the neighborhood with a fit of laughter early one morning when she responded to a disparaging comment about the vehicle in the driveway by flying over and defecating on the windshield.

But with all due respect for her unusual intelligence, nothing could have prepared him for the night she came upon him in a flurry of panicked squawks and molting feathers, dropping a copy of *The Daily Prophet* in his lap, then glancing around as if expecting the lunatic who was plastered across the front page to come charging up the street at any moment.

"Well," Severus said softly, with a dangerous edge to his voice as he examined the cadaver like figure with no small amount of revulsion. "I do believe I've found the opportunity I've been waiting for."



## 14. Making Contact

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### Chapter 14: Making Contact

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As soon as Lily had laid eyes on Crookshanks, she'd known she'd found her home for the upcoming school year. Not only would she be able to live in Gryffindor Tower and remain close to Harry, but she'd be large enough to do so without having to watch her step around that accursed rat. Damnable thing — she still hadn't forgiven Scabbers for the injuries he'd afflicted on Trevor the year before.

That was just the first of many unanswered questions she hoped to shed light on when she got back to Hogwarts. What was the strange presence inside what had once seemed like an ordinary rodent? Why was it so hostile? Could it be a danger to Harry or the other students?

For now, however, she only snuggled closer to her new owner, purring in contentment as the girl reached up to scratch her head.

"We're going to be great friends, aren't we, Crookshanks?" Hermione mumbled in a drowsy voice.

In response, Lily butted her gently on the chin.

Even though slumber came effortlessly to cats, human thoughts kept Lily awake for hours after her companion had drifted off to sleep. What a sweet thing she was, intelligent and kind, unfailingly loyal to her friends. Harry was lucky to have her in his life. Indeed, though not surprising, it was a huge relief that Harry had developed such strong relationships at Hogwarts, people who were willing to give him the support he desperately needed. He certainly wasn't getting it at home.

Scowling inwardly, Lily thought back to the awful night when Aunt Marge — who really wasn't Harry's aunt at all — had pushed him too far. She didn't blame her son for the way he'd reacted, and not only because it had been her own honor he'd been defending. Nasty, vicious woman... Marge deserved much worse than what she'd received, and one of these days, Lily might just take it upon herself to give it to her.

Still, Marge would've never gotten away with such abominable behavior if Petunia had had it in her to act like a decent human being every once in a while. Coldhearted bitch. Holding a grudge against Lily herself was one thing, justified or not, but taking it out on an innocent boy, a genuinely good child who just wanted to be loved?

Of course, that was a frustration Lily had lived with for well over a decade. There was little that surprised her anymore where the Dursleys were concerned, for all that it broke her heart whenever they found another way to hurt or alienate poor Harry. She could only hope he'd be able to cope with their despicable treatment for a few more years, until he was old enough to move out on his own.

Rising from the bed, she padded across the room to the food dish Hermione had carefully set out. She wasn't particularly hungry, but it was something to do, a futile attempt to distract herself from another source of distress that had been nagging at her for the past few weeks.

Sirius Black, mass murderer, who'd performed the supposedly impossible feat of escaping from Azkaban? Lily still wanted to believe it was nothing more than a mistake, even some ill-advised practical joke, though it wasn't the least bit funny. But it had been right there in print, screaming at her from the front page of *The Daily Prophet* she'd deposited in Severus's lap.

"Screaming" was the right word for it, and not just when it came to the headline. Her old friend had looked like a lunatic, eyes wild and hair askew, ranting and raving like a madman from the photograph beneath it. She'd only been able to bring herself to look at it once, and it had haunted her dreams ever since.

*Impossible.* If Sirius had been accused of going on a grief stricken rampage and killing a bunch of Voldemort's supporters, then yes, she might've believed it. But innocent bystanders? Helpless Muggles? No... impetuous Sirius might be, temperamental to a fault sometimes, but he wasn't a cold-blooded murderer. He just wasn't. There had to be a reason, some plausible explanation, something...

Growing too drowsy to give it any further thought for the time being, she curled up next to Hermione and drifted off to sleep.

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Lily struggled against the confines of her basket, wanting nothing more than to be free to roam the aisles of the moving train. Her human side scolded her harshly, reminding her to be patient, but animal instincts were overriding rational thought at the moment.

"Calm down, Crookshanks!" Hermione's voice demanded, though she sounded indulgent rather than stern, perhaps even a little amused as she clamped her arms down over the lid. "It isn't such a long trip, I promise."

That was a load of rubbish, of course, but Lily wasn't exactly in a position to argue. She settled down instead, allowing herself to be lulled into complacency by the sound of childish chatter. It was only the briefest reprieve, however, brought to a screeching halt by a moment of surprise, followed by an awful shock.

Professor R. J. Lupin?! Remus!

But there was no time to dwell on the presence of her old friend, or the joy of having confirmation at long last that he'd indeed survived the war. Oh no, she forgot all about Remus when she heard the next words out of Harry's mouth.

"Yeah, Mr. Weasley said Sirius Black broke out of Azkaban because of me."

Ron and Hermione let out a collective gasp, which Lily would've echoed if she'd had the ability to do so.

"But why?" Ron blurted out. "What's he got to do with you?"

"He was Voldemort's right-hand man," Harry explained, sounding impressively casual. "Mr. Weasley seems to think he blames me for losing everything he had and ending up in

prison. It might even be that he thinks killing me will bring Voldemort back. Anyway, your dad was worried that I might go after him.”

There was a long silence before Hermione finally spoke. “Sirius Black escaped to come after you? Oh, Harry... you’ll have to be really, really careful. Don’t go looking for trouble, Harry...”

The rest of their words faded into so much gibberish as Lily tried to make sense of it all. Sirius, a Death Eater? No, this was nonsense... no one had been more opposed to Voldemort’s regime, and besides, she’d seen him on that fateful night when she and James had fallen. He’d been grief stricken, weeping openly for his friends, offering to care for Harry, not...”

But then a flicker of doubt entered her mind... she might have faith in Sirius’s innocence on a rational level, but she was also a mother. The thought of anyone posing a threat to her child, whether her history with the man argued against it or not, was enough to eclipse everything else.

Was that why Dumbledore had chosen to leave Harry with the Dursleys rather than James’s best friend, the baby’s own godfather? Had he known or at least suspected something wasn’t right? And what about Sirius’s last minute insistence that they make Peter their secret keeper instead of him? It had seemed sensible at the time, but what if he’d done it to deflect the blame from himself when their location was discovered?

A thousand questions buzzed around in Lily’s head, none of which she could even begin to answer. No, she’d just have to be extra vigilant this year, taking advantage of her peculiar situation in order to find out as much as possible. She might not be in an ideal situation to protect her son, but damned if she wouldn’t try.

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“I told you this was a bad idea,” Severus said stiffly as he sank into a chair in the headmaster’s office. “What will it take to make you see that Lupin is *dangerous*?”

“That’s ‘Professor Lupin’,” Dumbledore responded in a mild voice, seeming fascinated by the task of arranging chocolate biscuits in a perfect circle before placing the platter on the desk between them. “And as much as I hate to contradict you, Severus, I think Remus is a wonderful choice. From what I hear, his first class was a rousing success.”

Severus scowled, humiliated all over again at the thought of Lupin’s subtle, yet pointed revenge against him for daring to insult one of his precious Gryffindors. Neville Longbottom... what the fuck did Lupin know about the sniveling idiot? It wasn’t as if he’d spent the previous two years dealing with the boy’s incompetence, forced to tolerate him as hundreds of galleons worth of equipment and precious ingredients went to waste.

But of course, that was merely an excuse, not the true reason behind treatment that was harsh even by Severus’s standards. No, he hated the way history seemed to be repeating itself — if Potter was the reincarnation of his father, then Longbottom was undoubtedly this generation’s answer to Peter Pettigrew, a pathetic, talentless worm who methodically attached himself to others as a means to shield himself from harsh realities. It was cowardice, plain and simple... the same lack of nerve that had resulted in a young Pettigrew hiding behind his

friends while hurling nasty insults in Severus's direction, yet meticulously avoiding any situation where he might have to face him one on one.

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Dumbledore raised a bushy eyebrow in his direction. "I heard about the incident with the toad. Now you know I rarely criticize your teaching methods, Severus, but that was a bit..."

"Extreme," Severus reluctantly agreed, hoping to avoid a lecture he *really* didn't want to sit through at the moment. "Yes, I know. It won't happen again."

"I understand that having Professor Lupin here is... difficult for you. Stirring up bad memories?"

Severus somehow managed to turn a harsh bark of laughter into a casual sniff. "It's not myself I'm worried about. The man is a werewolf, Headmaster. A werewolf. Have you thought about the consequences...?"

"But Remus has access to the Wolfsbane Potion now, which you yourself have assured me can be brewed each month without incident."

"Yes, but what if he forgets to take it? What if we end up with a monster on the loose?"

Dumbledore studied him with a placid expression. "I suppose you'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen."

"Ah, another responsibility to add to my list," Severus retorted, unable to hide the sarcasm in his voice. "A full-time teaching position, spy for the Order, glorified bodyguard for an ungrateful boy who seems to go out of his way to find trouble. Let's see, what else? Oh yes, I must remain on alert for any sign of Sirius Black, brew a plethora of complex potions for the hospital wing and now for Lupin as well, not to mention serving as Head of House for Slytherin and supervising countless detentions..."

He trailed off, glancing up sharply as Dumbledore let out a chuckle. "I'm afraid you have no one to blame for the last one but yourself, Severus."

"Fair enough," he grumbled. "But you see my point."

"I do. The point being that you're as concerned about this Sirius Black situation as the rest of us, and as usual, find it easier to vent your frustrations on more trivial things rather than admit the truth."

Severus shot him a baleful glare. "I was all too willing to share my concerns when you took it upon yourself to hire the werewolf. Not only is he dangerous in his own right, but he was also known to be close friends with the convicted murderer who is hellbent on slaughtering..."

"Remus would never betray us," Dumbledore said quietly. "However you feel about the man, he's honest by nature and has a good heart. His condition is not his fault. He deserves a chance, which I intend to give him."

"I seem to remember you giving Black the benefit of the doubt as well."

It was crossing a line, but Severus couldn't help himself. Trying to keep Potter alive was difficult enough without feeling like everyone in the world was determined to throw as many

extra complications as possible in his path. Beyond that, of course, he had his own issues to contend with, which was proving to be even more of a challenge than he'd expected.

Dumbledore didn't chastise him for his impertinence, however. "Sirius Black was corrupted by Voldemort. That is a terrible, tragic thing. But that doesn't cancel out the fact that there was a time when he had potential, when he was a bright and clever student, loyal to his friends, and..."

"He was capable of murder at 16 years old!" Severus hissed, hating that the raw pain that came along with that memory was still so evident in his voice. "Or are you forgetting what nearly happened in the Shrieking Shack?"

"A prank that went a little too far. I'm sure young Sirius had no intention of actually killing you."

"He set me up to come face to face with a fully grown werewolf! For all his other less than stellar qualities, he wasn't stupid. He knew exactly what he was doing, and he *wanted*..."

"Let it go, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted. "That was nearly 20 years ago, and here you are, alive and well."

"That's not the point. I simply brought it up to illustrate that you have a blind spot where your Gryffindors are concerned. You always have. Perhaps it might be inappropriate for me to share my observations on that fact, but in this case..."

"Remus's presence at this school will not endanger young Harry. I'm certain of that... so certain that I'd be willing to stake my life on it."

Part of Severus desperately wanted to continue the argument, but to do so would be an exercise in futility. One unwavering stare communicated that quite clearly, stronger than any vocal reprimand could have done. "Very well, Headmaster," he said after a moment, gritting his teeth through the words. "I will defer to your judgment on this matter. Will that be all?"

"Yes, unless you'd like to stay for a spot of tea." Damn it, the man's eyes were twinkling again, as if the unpleasant conversation had never occurred.

"No, thank you. It's getting late, and I have a pile of essays that need to be graded by morning."

"Very well. Good night, Severus."

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Lily was reeling as they made their way back to the dungeons, in the form of a tiny black beetle that was as good as invisible within the folds of Severus's voluminous robes. She'd meant to transfer herself, another switch that would make it easy to find her way back to Crookshanks again, but she was too stunned for the thought to even cross her mind until they were shut away in Severus's quarters. No matter — Potions class would make it almost mindlessly simple to switch if she could wait until morning.

The fact that Remus was a werewolf was nothing new — one didn't become friends with the Marauders without discovering the truth sooner or later. But the rest of it was nothing short of a terrible shock. Sirius had tricked Severus into encountering Remus during one of

his changes? No, that was no practical joke — caught alone with a werewolf would mean almost certain death. And yes, Severus was right — Sirius knew that, which she could personally attest to. After all, he'd been in the same Defense Against the Dark Arts class as she had. Wasn't it that same year when they'd been obligated to write an essay on the subject?

Why would Sirius do such a thing? Granted, there was no love lost between Severus and the Marauders, resulting in any number of cruel tricks that went both ways. But there was also a hell of a difference between the effects of a hex that could be cured with a quick visit to Madame Pomfrey, and setting someone up to be savaged by a feral werewolf.

Trying to understand why Sirius would do something so awful to Severus was difficult enough, even while considering years worth of a bitter grudge. But what about Remus? If nothing else, how could Sirius have set one of his closest friends up to commit a murder that would've been beyond his control? Hadn't he realized what the consequences would have been, expulsion being the very least of them?

Come to think of it, why hadn't Sirius himself been expelled for taking such a terrible risk with someone else's life? But there again, the earlier conversation had provided an answer... another nail in the coffin of the hero worship she'd once held for Dumbledore. Of course, that admiration had already faded quite a bit upon the realization that the old headmaster had placed her own son in danger on more than one occasion when Harry didn't need to be there.

*"I simply brought it up to illustrate that you have a blind spot where your Gryffindors are concerned,"* Severus's voice echoed in her mind. *"You always have."*

Well yes, everyone knew that, but did it really go as far as Dumbledore turning a blind eye to a situation that could have resulted in murder? The thought was disconcerting, to say the least.

Crawling out of the robe that had been discarded without her notice, Lily scrambled up the leg of a small table and scanned the room. Severus was slumped in a chair nearby, barefooted with his shirtsleeves rolled up, staring despondently into the fire as he lifted a glass of amber liquid to his lips. Scotch? Probably. He'd always had a taste for Muggle alcohol, even when he'd technically been too young to drink the stuff.

Now more than ever, Lily hated her own limitations, despised the inability to communicate with the people around her. The loneliness was terrible, of course, but more than that, there was so much she wanted to know, so many things that she'd once taken for granted that no longer made sense. The people she'd once trusted implicitly were swiftly becoming strangers in her eyes — Sirius, Dumbledore... she even had her doubts about Remus in light of Severus's reservations.

And why shouldn't she? Out of everyone from her former life, Severus seemed to be the only one who prioritized Harry's protection over all other things. Yes, the harsh attitude he sometimes showed where her son was uncalled for, and no doubt she would've given him a piece of her mind had she been able to do so. But it was also obvious that he was under a great deal of pressure, burdened with more responsibility than any one man should have to deal with.

For now, the taut lines of anger on his face had faded, harsh features going slack beneath the weight of deep, pervasive weariness. Even as she watched, his head drifted to one side,

eyes falling closed just before the glass fell from his limp fingers and shattered all over the floor.

It was a testament to how exhausted he must've been that he didn't even stir in response.

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Lily didn't return to Gryffindor tower the following day. As it happened, she encountered Crookshanks roaming around on the first floor, relieved to escape the annoying sound of her own buzzing as she switched to him from the body of a common housefly. It was then that she felt it — a surprisingly warm gust of air, the smell of fresh foliage on the breeze that wafted in from an open window.

Suddenly, she had to be outside. It was as simple as that.

She trotted around the grounds for a while, giving herself over to the animal instincts that were somehow more persistent in this particular form as a large moth flitted across her path. Chasing it with wild abandon, she very nearly forgot everything else... her helpless situation, countless unanswered questions and innumerable concerns. All she knew was how good it felt to run free, how much she loved galloping through the soft grass with the warm sunshine on her back. It was only when her quarry eluded her, disappearing into the canopy of leaves above her head, when she realized she'd ventured deep into the Forbidden Forest.

That in and of itself was no big deal — she'd spent plenty of time here in the weeks leading up to Harry's first school year. No, what left her disconcerted was that it felt... different today. Thanks to the heightened instincts that were a particular advantage of her current form, she could feel something watching her, even if she couldn't see it. More than that, it wasn't any ordinary animal... that would've been a weaker, more benign sort of presence.

This one wasn't sinister, necessarily, but it was strong. Almost... *human*.

A centaur, perhaps? But no... it wasn't a centaur that stepped out of the trees just ahead. It was a dog, a massive black canine that was padding toward her without a trace of hesitation, not stopping until it was standing only a few feet away.

Part of Lily was insisting that she should run, but then again, she detected no trace of malice in this creature. No, she only saw curiosity in the round dark eyes that swept over her, a need for understanding that she recognized all too well. This was much the same way in which she'd approached Scabbers when she'd sensed there was something different about the rat, a familiar pressure she'd applied with her own mind that she now felt tickling at her thoughts.

*Who are you?*

She jumped, coarse orange hair standing up in sharp bristles on her back as she struggled to understand the enormity of what was happening. There was something human inside this dog, and more than that, it recognized the same in her. 12 years of silence, of solitude, of not knowing if she'd ever be able to communicate with her own kind again. Oh, sweet Merlin...

Whatever was going on here, it was monumental enough to throw caution to the wind, to not even consider the risk she might be taking as she projected her excited response back at

the creature.

*I'm Lily. Lily Potter.*



## 15. Revisiting the Past

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### Chapter 15: Revisiting the Past

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The massive black dog snarled as it stalked toward Lily, pure, animalistic savagery strangely at odds with the distinctly human thoughts that pummeled her mind.

*Lily Potter is dead. What the bloody hell are you playing at?*

Alarmed, she scrambled up the closest tree, taking refuge on a low hanging branch as she stared down at the dog with fearful eyes. And yet she still couldn't detect any hint of malice in the creature, not even a whisper of evil intent. It — *he*, as the presence within was clearly male — was infuriated, yes. But everything about him, from the words echoing inside her mind to the growls emanating from low in his throat were heavily laced with... pain?

Yes, that was it... as if he were the victim out for revenge, not the assailant.

*The world believes I'm dead*, she silently responded, struggling to formulate the first real communication she'd had with another human in over a decade. *But I'm not... at least, not in the way you think. Please! Calm down and listen to me. I don't know how to explain, but...*

In response, the dog let out a howl of helpless rage, throwing all his weight against the trunk of the tree. It was a useless effort. Thick and sturdy, the oak tree remained impervious to his efforts.

*You're lying! I saw Lily's body! 12 years ago, I saw... I was there in Godric's Hollow right after it happened! So don't try to tell me...* the thought trailed off abruptly as he sank down on his haunches, shaking his enormous head back and forth.

*You... you saw me?*

*I saw Lily and James! Little Harry crying in his crib, I'll never forget...*

And then it hit her as if from out of nowhere. *Sirius?!*

Stunned, she nearly fell out of the tree, digging her claws in almost as an afterthought as she swayed precariously on the narrow branch. It couldn't be... and yet if more than two decades in the Wizarding world had taught her anything, it was that things didn't *need* to make sense to be perfectly real. Yes, when she looked at the dog again, it seemed so obvious that she was amazed she hadn't realized the truth to begin with. Though very much a canine, there was something familiar about his features — the long, elegant snout reminding her of an aristocratic nose, the same sort of fathomless quality to the dark eyes that were still glaring up at her, undisguised fury mingled with grief.

When the dog didn't respond, she tried again. *Sirius, I know it's you. And I know this seems hard to believe, but please... I really am...*

*No!*

*Then let me prove it to you. Ask me questions. Things that no one else would know.*

*This is a trick, he insisted.*

Swallowing her fear, she inched her way back down the tree and then dropped to the ground, seating herself in front of him and gazing directly into his eyes. His teeth were still bared, but he made no attempt to attack her.

*Sirius, she thought as gently as she could manage. Ask me.*

He let out a huff of impatience, but after a moment, she heard him in her mind again. His thoughts were still heavily laced with skepticism, but there was something else there, too... the slightest trace of hope.

*What did you used to tell me was more important than anything else when it came to girls?*

She smiled inwardly at the irony of him choosing that question in particular. *I said that all girls want a boy who will listen to them.*

*Right. He hesitated, lowering his head to scrutinize her more closely. That could be a lucky guess. What about...? Oh, here's a good one. What was the first thing you said to Harry after he was born? Only people in the room at the time were Lily, James, and myself.*

If she'd been in human form, there would've been tears streaming down her cheeks. *I told him that no child would ever be more loved than him.*

And that was all it took. Sirius let out a soft, mournful howl as he slumped to the ground, peering up at her with a thousand questions in his eyes. She could feel his confusion swirling around in her mind, half formed fragments of thought combined with a flurry of emotional reactions, all so intense that he couldn't seem to manage a coherent sentence. Of course, she was rather stunned herself, but her own bewilderment would have to wait.

*Sirius?*

*Lily... Oh God, how? What...? It doesn't...*

She moved a little closer, opting for a gentle face bump in place of the comforting hug she wished she could give him. *It doesn't make sense, she finished for him. I know, I still don't know what happened to me. When I was hit with the Killing Curse, I really did feel like I was dying. I suppose I did in a sense — we both saw my body. But my soul, if that's what this is...*

*You're not an Animagus.*

*No, I'm not. Are you?*

*He gave her a strange look. Of course. James never told you?*

In that moment, she desperately wanted to flash him a mischievous smile. *I think we both know that James never told me a lot of things.*

*Yeah, Sirius agreed, letting out a snort. Not his fault you were such a do-gooder, Lils.*

*Hey!*

The banter was intimately familiar, comforting beyond description. If she closed her eyes, she could almost believe that the better part of two decades had fallen away, that they were

merely students again, young and carefree and unaware of all the tragedy they would soon be forced to endure. But of course, she didn't have the luxury of indulging those illusions... it was the present that was important, not the past.

Sirius seemed to have come to this conclusion as well as he projected another onslaught of questions into her mind. *I still can't believe it. All these years, where have you been? Does anyone else know? You've been like this the entire time?*

*Not exactly. I can switch between animals. I've been a lot of things over the years, whatever it took to stay close to Harry. Cats, dogs, birds, even insects...*

*What I want to know is how it happened in the first place. The Killing Curse affects everyone the same way. We've always known that.*

*Not Harry.*

He nodded his shaggy head. *No, not Harry, thank Merlin. Can you remember anything else from that night?*

Voldemort, she paused when Sirius cringed ever so slightly, *was saying something under his breath right before he cast the Killing Curse. I couldn't make out the words, but he had the strangest look in his eye. It was as if... well, I don't know how to describe it.*

*Another curse? Not like anything I've ever heard of, but I guess the bastard knew more about the Dark Arts than any of us ever did.*

Lily frowned inwardly. *Whatever it is, I don't think it's Dark Magic. I know this is going to sound strange, but it was as if... like he didn't really want to kill me.*

*What? That's absurd!*

*I know, I thought the same thing at the time. I still do. But he gave me several chances to move out of the way. He wasn't even particularly nasty about it... at least, not how I imagined he'd be.*

Sirius seemed on the verge of responding, but then dipped his head to gnaw furiously at one of his hindquarters. *Damned fleas!*

*Hey Sirius?*

He straightened up again, fixing her with an inquiring look.

*Why did you come here? Everyone thinks you're out to murder Harry, but I just can't believe...*

For the rest of her life, Lily would never forget the sorrow in his eyes in that moment. That would've been all the answer she needed, even if he'd never explained his reasons. But of course, he did, bombarding her with an increasing sense of helpless fury as he detailed Peter's betrayal, followed by his own long years in Azkaban and the sheer desperation that had prompted his escape.

And with that, all the pieces settled into place, so effortlessly that it seemed as if she'd known the truth all along. That rat... that vile little creature, permeating the air itself with

treachery and cowardice whenever it was near. She should've known... Moony, Padfoot, Wormtail... Prongs.

*All of you?* she thought, quite sure her voice must've been no more than a whisper in his mind. *I never knew. James never... he never...*

*We made a pact between us that no one else would ever know. I thought James would've told you the truth sooner or later, but then again, he always took his vows seriously, didn't he? Never known a finer... anyway, we did it for Remus's sake, so he wouldn't have to go through his transformations alone. Did it so we could keep him company, control him if need be. Well, not Wormtail, but he was always a useless little shit, wasn't he? Should've seen it sooner, should've never let him get so close. God, Lils, I'm so sorry.*

*It isn't your fault, Sirius.*

*I should've been able to stop him,* he continued as if he hadn't heard her, the echo of his voice brittle and filled with remorse. *Should've known what he'd do.. All those people, those poor, defenseless Muggles... and worse, what happened to you and James, little Harry. Why couldn't I have just...?*

*Stop it.* She butted him in the face again, though none too gently this time. *There's nothing we can do to change the past. All that matters is... God, he's up there with Harry right now.*

Sirius gave her a sharp look. *You've seen him?*

She projected a hollow laugh as she rose to her feet. *Of course I have — I've been living in the same dormitory with him for years. I knew there was something off about him, but I could never figure out what it was. And all this time, he could've...*

*Lils, don't blame yourself... wait, where are you going?*

*Where do you think?* she projected back at him as she raced away.

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It bloody fucking figured.

For the first time in months, Severus had retired early, finally exhausted to the point where not even an endless onslaught of stress, worry, and helpless anger could've kept him awake. He'd been too weary to even strip off his outer robes before collapsing on the bed, immediately drifting off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

But any hope for a decent amount of rest, not to mention being able to bypass his least favorite night of the year, had been destroyed, shattered to bits by the pandemonium that had ensued less than an hour after he'd lain down.

Soon enough, he was stalking through the castle with his face fixed in a thunderous scowl, praying to deities he'd never believed in that he'd be the one to find Sirius Black. Fucking bastard. To be given a chance to hex him into oblivion, to make him scream and beg for mercy, preferably soiling himself and crying for his mother in the process... that would sure as hell be worth the loss of sleep.

Of course, Severus would never go that far, just as he'd never actually lace Lupin's bloody Wolfsbane potion with poison as he so often fantasized about doing. It was merely the thought of such things that kept him going these days... and for now, a worthy replacement for the strong black coffee he was craving as he cast a flurry of detection spells in every direction.

Unfortunately, luck wasn't on his side tonight... not that it ever was.

He was forced to admit defeat in the end, barely able to suppress his fury when Dumbledore once again waved away his suspicions about Lupin. Not for the first time, Severus wondered if this was something the old man did intentionally, if he found some perverse pleasure in raising the stakes just to test all of their limits. Maddening... it wasn't that watching after the boy was so bad, arrogant little shit or not. No, it was being thwarted at every turn when he tried to do just that, concerns steadfastly ignored, crucial information withheld far more often than it was provided.

Severus never did get back to sleep that night. But he finally got his coffee, at least, four cups that he sucked down during his restless prowling, long after the other professors had withdrawn to their private quarters. They were all comforted by Dumbledore's reassurances, along with the extra wards that had been painstakingly cast throughout the night. It wasn't so easy for Severus, however, who was swiftly coming to the realization that he had little hope of preventing what was to come. Bloodshed, catastrophe, loss of life... it seemed nothing less would sway Dumbledore from his blind favoritism to those fucking Marauders.

Brooding and silent, Severus floated like a ghost through the halls in the chilly hours just before dawn. And that was exactly what he saw everywhere he looked — ghosts.

As was always the case when Halloween came around, he couldn't escape the fact that every part of Hogwarts held some special significance, a faint echo of his younger self. And of course, he usually thought of Lily more than anything else. So many memories... some good and others not so much, yet each giving him the strength to continue on in this miserable existence until he fulfilled his promise to her.

But even that bittersweet comfort was beyond him this year. Recollections of her were softer now, more hazy, pushed to the wayside by far more dominant reminders of a group of jeering boys who'd made it their mission to ruin his life. Well, they'd certainly managed that, hadn't they? Far more than the Dark Lord had done, whether he'd cast the Killing Curse or not. And while Severus might have delivered that fucking prophecy into Voldemort's hands, Lily would've never been in danger in the first place if it weren't for James Bloody Potter... just as she wouldn't have died if Sirius Fucking Black hadn't betrayed his friends.

Stupidly perhaps, Severus had thought he'd worked through the worst of his bitterness toward the Marauders. But that had been before they'd invaded his life all over again... Lupin skulking about the castle, Black's name on everyone's lips, and of course, a son that was the exact replica of his arrogant bastard of father, both inside and out.

It was their faces he saw as he walked through the corridors, mumbling terse greetings to colleagues while snarling at any students who were stupid enough to cross his path. Yes, there it was, the alcove where he'd been sitting with his nose buried in a book as he'd waited for Transfiguration to start, unaware that he'd been only seconds away from being the unfortunate recipient of an itching hex. That had been Black's doing, leaving him in the

hospital wing for the rest of the day. Oh right, and just a few steps further was where Potter had...

“Good morning, Severus.”

The urge to curse the werewolf into oblivion was nearly impossible to resist, but somehow, Severus managed to pass him with nothing more than a curt nod.

Strangely enough, it was memories of Lupin that haunted him the most. The quiet, unassuming boy had never thrown a single hex in his direction, never called him names or made nasty remarks within his hearing. On the contrary, his eyes had often been filled with sympathy, and for that, Severus had always hated him on an entirely different level. Spineless coward. That was one of the cruelest lessons he'd learned at far too young an age. Even those who recognized cruelty wouldn't lift a finger to stop it if it was an inconvenience for them to do so. Yes, it seemed Lupin had preferred to watch him suffer rather than stand up to his precious friends.

That was what Dumbledore didn't seem to understand. While even Severus could grudgingly admit that Lupin on his own wasn't a bad sort (at least in human form), his loyalty was dangerous, as was his tendency to turn a blind eye whenever he could get away with it. No, he wasn't likely to agree with the idea of Potter Jr. being murdered, but would that stop him from accepting any flimsy excuse to let Black into the castle, convinced that his friend meant no harm?

Shaken from his reverie by a soft cough, he was surprised to find himself outside his own classroom. His eyes passed wearily over the group of first year Hufflepuffs and Ravensclaws who were waiting for his appearance, just before he snatched open the door and ushered them inside.

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*What were you thinking?!*

If Sirius had been in human form, Lily was quite sure he would've shrugged in response. *You gave me an opening*, he thought at her instead. *I took it.*

Of course, it didn't help to point out that he was a wanted man, that it was highly dangerous for him to enter the castle. Nor did there seem to be any point in reminding him that in her current form, she was perfectly capable of taking care of the rat on her own, even if she'd failed this time around. Sirius was beyond caution, determined to the point of fanaticism to have his revenge. He'd already forced her to agree not to kill Peter without his involvement, even if she was given the perfect opportunity to do so.

Rather than feeling more secure with a friend at her side, Lily was left to struggle with a fresh wave of anxiety. For one thing, Sirius had changed. The boy she'd known was still there, of course, but carelessness had turned to recklessness, underlying intensity transformed into blatant desperation. There was no telling how far he might go in his determination to put an end to Peter, how much he might be willing to sacrifice in the process. And although her instincts as a mother insisted that Harry's safety was more important than anything else, she was much more comfortable with putting her own life on the line rather than that of a friend's.

And there was another reason Sirius's survival was of paramount importance. That became clear when they discussed her own situation in more detail.

*You have to be careful, Sirius, she insisted as they feasted upon a raw steak she'd somehow managed to smuggle from the Hogwarts kitchens. You're the only one who knows that I'm alive.*

*Don't worry, Lils. Whatever happens, I'll make sure Harry knows the truth before I die.*

But that gave her pause. *I'm not sure it would be such a good idea to tell him.*

*Why?*

*Lots of reasons. If I'm stuck like this forever...*

Sirius lifted his massive head, giving her a thoughtful look. *Who's to say you are? There might be a counterspell, something to reverse... whatever it is that happened to you. We just have to find it.*

*I've dreamed about that every day for the past 12 years. But I don't know how...*

*Dumbledore might be able to help.*

*No!* she thought at him so intensely that he jumped, staring at her in surprise.

*Why not?*

But she wasn't sure she should tell him about her conflicted feelings where her former hero was concerned, nor of her suspicions that he was placing Harry in more danger than was necessary, even using him to further some cause she didn't understand just yet. So much of her newfound skepticism was based on instinct and subtleties, things that Sirius, with his brash, straightforward manner, wasn't likely to understand.

*I can't explain it. Just promise me you won't say anything to anybody unless I tell you it's okay.*

Okay, he agreed, albeit with a great deal of reluctance. *Anyway, what we need to worry about now is how to get rid of that fucking traitor. Not much else either of us can do until then.*

## 16. Confrontation

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### Chapter 16: Confrontation

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Peter Pettigrew definitely had his share of less than stellar qualities. Unfortunately, a lack of cunning wasn't one of them.

For months, Lily pursued him with single-minded determination, only to be neatly evaded at every turn. He stayed out of sight, leaving traces of his scent in strategic locations to throw her off the trail. And on those rare occasions when necessity demanded he make an appearance, he was cautious to a maddening degree, staying so close to Ron that there was no way to launch a proper attack without injuring the boy or getting tossed out of Gryffindor Tower.

Meanwhile, she'd come to the conclusion that her identity had to remain secret for the time being. With little knowledge of her own limitations, how could she be sure she didn't have some vulnerability that might be used to the advantage of Lord Voldemort or his followers? The spell had been cast for a reason, obviously, and it was impossible to believe it had been an altruistic one. No, it seemed best to err on the side of caution, to watch and wait while doing everything she could to help Harry without anyone being aware of her presence. After all, she had one advantage over everyone else — the ability to spy on anyone she pleased at any given time. What if that allowed her to be privy to information that could save her son's life in the future?

Sirius had hotly disagreed, insisting Harry had a right to know his mother was alive, that he could be sworn to secrecy if need be. That was the hardest part to reconcile with, being as she desperately wanted to have at least some sort of relationship with her son. But how could she take that risk without knowing whether it was safe to reveal herself? Dumbledore and Voldemort were two of the most powerful Legilimens in living memory, and the former was already predicting that a second war was close at hand. It wasn't a matter of asking Harry to keep her secret — he might not be given a choice in the matter.

*You have to promise, Sirius. Not a word to anyone.*

*Don't you think he deserves to know the truth, Lils? That he's not alone?*

*He knows he's not alone. Harry has friends, people who love him and will watch out for him. I don't like it either, but this is the way it has to be, at least for now.*

*There has to be a better solution. Dumbledore might be able to...*

*No, she'd insisted yet again. I have a better idea.*

*What's that?*

*For you to survive and clear your name. If you can manage that, maybe we can find the answer ourselves.*



Sirius had given her a dubious look. *You know why I broke out of Azkaban — whatever it takes, I'm not giving up until it's done.*

*But when everyone knows the truth...*

*Either way, it doesn't matter — I just want him dead.*

She'd given up after that, silenced by the fury that emanated from him in seething hot waves whenever they spoke of Peter. Not that she didn't feel the same, of course — she could never stop herself from clawing and spitting whenever she was near the rat, even when there was nothing she could do to strike out at him. But she was also the more rational one in this situation, and so it was important to push her own emotions aside in an effort to keep his under control.

As grateful as she was to be reunited with her old friend, Sirius quickly became a constant source of stress in her life. His years in Azkaban hadn't done him any favors where impulse control was concerned. After the night he'd been foolish enough to follow her up to Gryffindor Tower, leaving chaos and destruction in his wake, she'd been forced to intervene on numerous occasions to prevent him from doing something reckless.

Unfortunately, she wasn't always successful. She hadn't been with him when he'd taken it upon himself to check out one of Harry's Quidditch games, nor when he'd tried to reach Remus, having discovered that most of the students were off at Hogsmeade that day. Thankfully, those incidents had resulted in nothing more than the harsh scoldings Sirius had been forced to endure, but the near escapes had her constantly on edge.

For the first time in her strange second existence, she no longer felt like she was living a life of relative leisure. There were never enough hours in the day anymore, nor was it possible to be as many places as she needed to be at any given time. Futile attempts to capture Peter, hours spent looking after Harry, transferring to different creatures to spy on Dumbledore, monitoring Sirius in the hope of preventing him from doing anything stupid... it was a pity she couldn't make use of Hermione's Time-Turner in her current condition.

All the same, there were quite a few high points throughout the rest of the year. Lily's favorite had been Christmas — disguised as Crookshanks, she'd been able to take an order to the Owl Office in Hogsmeade on Sirius's behalf. He'd been the one who'd paid for the Firebolt, of course, but it was still the closest she'd come to being able to give Harry a gift in well over a decade. And once he'd been able to use it — somewhat delayed thanks to a well-meaning Hermione — it had been obvious that it was the best present he'd ever received.

But there were low points, too. She'd taken to staying with Hermione more frequently amidst the unfortunate tension between her and Ron, wishing she could do more to comfort the poor girl as she'd cried herself to sleep night after night. Lily genuinely liked Hermione — seeing her distressed would've been hard enough without knowing it was her own relentless pursuit of Scabbers that was causing most of the problems. How she wished she could sit Harry and his friends down and explain that there was a very good reason for her actions, perhaps even enlist their help rather than patiently enduring their continued resistance. But of course, that was impossible... she could only console herself with the hope that sooner or later, Peter would be unmasked and they'd finally know the truth.

Unfortunately, hope was replaced by despair when the bloody rat disappeared, faking his death all over again with a bit of blood and a handful of strategically placed cat hairs. Sirius was like a madman, spending an alarming amount of time in human form simply for the pleasure of cursing aloud in frustration. Day after day, he paced restlessly within the confines of the Forbidden Forest, only ever switching back to the shaggy black dog at the sound of an unfamiliar noise or a sudden drop in temperature that suggested the dementors were drawing a little too close for comfort. Lily stayed at his side constantly then, afraid he might do something reckless, yet increasingly determined to see him have the chance to prove his innocence.

And then an opportunity presented itself as if from out of nowhere, a subtle scent carried on the breeze on a balmy June night. There was no time to question their actions, no chance to come up with a proper strategy or evaluate the risk they might be taking. No, they were past that now, beyond reason in their desperation to put an end to the menace that was Peter Pettigrew once and for all.

Sirius shot out from the forest like a bullet from a Muggle gun with Lily close on his heels, in hot pursuit of the tiny rodent that was racing away through the tall, thick grass. Ron, Harry, and Hermione made an abrupt appearance soon thereafter, the first shouting frantically after his pet as the latter two followed close on his heels.

Everything was a blur until Ron cried out in triumph, shoving the wriggling Scabbers deep into his pocket. Frustrated, Lily let out a loud hiss, but before she could even begin to think of what to do next, Sirius had knocked Harry out of the way and clamped his mouth around Ron's arm.

*Where are you taking him?!* she projected, noting with a great deal of alarm that Sirius was dragging the boy straight toward the Whomping Willow.

*It's all right, Lils,* he thought back at her, the words breathless with anticipation within the confines of her mind. *There's a knot at the base of the tree — press on it!*

She darted between the flailing branches, driven to action by the frightened screams of the children behind her. For a few panicked seconds, she saw nothing, and then there it was... she hurled herself at the large knot, extending both front paws and shoving against it with all the strength she had. There was no time to react to the absence of motion, however, only to slip between the gap in the roots where Sirius had disappeared just moments before. She raced down the tunnel with Harry and Hermione a few steps behind, feeling as if it would go on forever until finally, she emerged into what she knew to be the Shrieking Shack.

*Sirius?*

*Up here!*

In the end, there was little she could do as the scene unfolded. The children's fear was perfectly understandable, and not only because they'd been led to believe that the man who was ostensibly holding them captive was a murderer. Sirius looked terrifying either way, unkempt and emaciated, with a feverish light in his eyes as he disarmed them all.

"If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us, too!" Ron shouted, finding the strength to rise to his feet despite what was clearly a broken leg.

*Sirius, calm down. Look at them — they're scared out of their wits. Calm down and tell them the truth before this gets even more out of hand.*

As she projected the thought, Sirius seemed to regain some measure of control over himself. "Lie down," he told Ron, his voice soft and surprisingly gentle. "You will damage that leg even more."

But it did little good. Hermione seemed to err on the side of caution, thankfully, but the boys were angry and defiant... the only way boys their age knew how to cope with fear. It was a good thing Sirius wasn't the murderer they believed him to be. Otherwise, Harry's reckless taunting would've been the death of him. It was the first time Lily had admitted to herself that her son might have a problem with his temper, one that could prove to be dangerous in the future, perhaps even fatal. A distressing thought, to be sure, but not one she had time to dwell on as Harry launched himself at Sirius and began to pummel him with a flurry of small fists.

Seeing no other option, she launched herself into the fray, desperate to prevent Harry from inflicting any permanent damage. She dug her claws into the tender flesh of his arm to prevent him from reaching his wand, fought to retrieve it herself, but in the end, it was all for nothing. Only a few seconds later, he was on his feet with the wand clutched tightly in his hand, his green eyes blazing with fury. Sirius was trying to explain himself, pleading for the chance to be heard, but there was too much fear, too much pain, too much bitterness in Harry's expression to hope he would listen.

And so Lily did the only thing that made sense in that moment, plopping herself down on her old friend's chest and gazing up at Harry with a silent, beseeching stare, trusting that the goodness in his heart would prevent him from killing them both. Of course, if he did strike, she was just as likely to make another narrow escape as she had in the past, but he couldn't know that. And Crookshanks the cat, an innocent animal, would be dead either way.

For seconds that felt more like years, no one moved or even seemed to breathe as Harry stood there with his wand clutched tightly in one fist. And then there was a sudden noise, a shuffle of footsteps from the floor below. Hermione let out a succession of urgent screams and in a flash, Remus was bursting into the room, taking in the scene in the blink of an eye before disarming them all. Was this better... or worse?

*Better*, Lily decided, having the advantage of understanding the cryptic words and the moment of realization that immediately followed. In the midst of all the chaos, it warmed her to her soul to watch Remus help Sirius to his feet, then wrap his arms around the emaciated body in a loving embrace.

Of course, the others didn't agree. Hermione was screaming accusations, both she and the others reacting with renewed fury under the belief that the teacher they'd grown to trust had been betraying them all along. What else were they supposed to think?

*Get on with it!* she projected at Sirius with a sudden rush of impatience. *Tell them the truth!*

But then she glanced up at him, immediately struck by a deep sense of shame as he slumped down onto the four-poster bed, suddenly seeming small and fragile as he buried his face in a trembling hand. Amidst all his righteous fury, his determination to see that justice

was done, sometimes it was easy to forget everything he'd suffered and what that must've done to him. He was still grieving, for one thing, mourning the loss of James with an intensity she hadn't felt in years... if she'd ever felt it at all. Was it guilt that made it so difficult for him to come to terms with his best friend's death? Or was it that in truth, he'd been bound more deeply to James than anyone else in the world, hardly able to function without him? Maybe it was a bit of both, but in the end, it hardly mattered. Exposing Peter was the one thing — the *only* thing — that might give him the chance to live again. Without it, he was as good as dead already, something he must've realized long before she had.

*It's all right*, she thought at him much more gently as she leapt up beside him, settling herself on his lap in the hope of offering some small reassurance. *Remus is here now... I'm sure he can take care of it.*

*I'm not helpless.* The words that came back to her were sullen, even a little offended, an uncanny reminder of the Sirius she'd known two decades before. Comforted by the familiarity, she listened as Remus explained about the Marauder's Map — another secret that had obviously been kept from her in their school days. It seemed both Peter and Sirius had shown up on the piece of parchment, alerting Remus to their presence. But what about her? No. Even if Remus hadn't seen her, Harry would surely have noticed if his supposedly dead mother had suddenly appeared to be in Gryffindor Tower or trotting across the grounds. Whatever the reason, it seemed she was as invisible as ever.

And then at last, Remus got to the point, persuading Ron to retrieve Scabbers from his pocket as Harry and Hermione looked on in bewilderment.

"What's my rat got to do with anything?"

All the air seemed to have been sucked out of the dank little room as Remus said, "He's a wizard."

"An Animagus," Sirius chimed in, "by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

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Severus was in no hurry to take off the Invisibility Cloak.

Swiftly assessing that the children — the foolish, idiotic children — were in no immediate danger, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall to listen. For some reason, the werewolf had taken it upon himself to tell his entire life story, a gag worthy, self pitying tale that nearly put Severus to sleep until one crucial point made his breath catch in his throat.

"Instead, they did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable, but the best times of my life," Lupin said, flashing Potter a sentimental smile. "They became Animagi."

*What the fuck?* Severus listened in stunned silence as Lupin continued, explaining how they'd learned and to what end. The others had gone to all that trouble just to keep the werewolf company? Well, that part wasn't so surprising — God forbid any of the Marauders should have ever had to cope with anything on their own.

“That was still really dangerous!” Miss Granger piped up. “Running around in the dark with a werewolf! What if you’d given the others the slip and bitten somebody?”

Severus barely managed to muffle a derisive snort. Sensible enough, though what the girl clearly didn’t realize was that Lupin and his precious friends had always been far too self-involved to worry about the consequences of their actions. No need to speak about it in the past tense either — after all, the werewolf had forgotten his potion this very night, putting dozens of lives at risk simply because he’d been in too much of a hurry to sneak out of the castle and visit his homicidal maniac of a friend. Hell, for all Severus knew, the children had been lured here by Lupin himself, blindly following the instructions of someone they’d assumed to be a trusted teacher.

“A thought that still haunts me,” Lupin said, contradicting Severus’s resentful musings in his best ‘pity poor me’ voice. “And there were near misses, many of them.”

*You don’t say?!* Scowling, Severus resisted the urge to reach for his wand and throw a hex, shoving his tightly clenched fists into his pockets instead. Soon enough, the werewolf was off on a maudlin rant about betraying Dumbledore’s trust, leading his friends to break the law by becoming Animagi, and of course, failing to disclose this crucial information when it pertained to a convicted killer on the loose who had every intention of coming after an innocent student.

“Why? Because I was too cowardly.”

A moment of honesty... how refreshing.

“So, in a way, Snape’s been right about me all along.”

No shit. Not that anyone had listened.

“Snape?” Black demanded, his voice full of malice. “What’s Snape got to do with it?”

It wasn’t easy to listen to such a twisted version of the past. Not surprisingly, Black didn’t show a trace of remorse for nearly getting Severus killed, and of course, there was no mention of the years of torment he’d suffered at the Marauders’s hands. They put all the blame on him, bloody liars that they were, portraying themselves as innocent boys out for a bit of fun rather than relentless bullies. Yes, there had been a good bit of spite involved in Severus’s actions as well, but it wasn’t as if they were unprovoked. And in the end, the biggest reason behind his constant attempts to get the Marauders expelled had been that he’d simply wanted to finish out his schooling in relative peace.

“But your father, who’d heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life.”

*Bullshit!* How typical... painting James Potter out to be the fucking hero when they both knew very well that he’d only done it to save their precious asses.

“So that’s why Snape doesn’t like you,” the younger Potter said, devouring their ludicrous version of the story without a trace of skepticism. “Because he thought you were in on the joke?”

Too furious to maintain his silence any longer, Severus threw off the cloak and withdrew his wand in one fluid motion, pointing the latter directly at Lupin’s chest.

“That’s right.”

Well, not exactly... he didn’t believe Lupin had been aware of what Black had been planning that night. But ‘in on the joke’? There couldn’t be a better choice of words. It didn’t matter whether the werewolf had been an active participant in their pranks — by remaining friends with the Marauders, forever defending and making excuses for their actions, he was effectively condoning such cruel, reckless behavior. And again, it was worse coming from Lupin. Melodramatic or not, the remorse in his eyes was genuine, as was the realization that he’d nearly been forced to take part in what would’ve been an awful, awful crime. Yes, Lupin knew right from wrong, and he didn’t fucking care... just like he obviously didn’t give a shit that Potter and his friends were in immediate danger thanks to his own cowardice.

What were they planning... or more accurately, what was Black intending to do while the werewolf passively allowed it to happen? Did it matter? There was no way in hell they were going to get away with it. Not this time.

## 17. A Narrow Escape

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### Chapter 17: A Narrow Escape

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If Lily hadn't known better, she might've assumed Sirius had already received the Dementor's Kiss.

His emaciated body was slumped in a chair beside the window, dark eyes unfocused and dull with defeat. She could detect no fear in him anymore, no trace of the mad, restless energy that had sustained him up until the moment Peter had escaped. All that had given way to an awful sense of resignation, which of course, was perfectly appropriate under the circumstances. How else was he supposed to feel, knowing he was only minutes away from enduring a fate worse than death?

Well, if nothing else, at least he wouldn't be alone when it happened.

*Sirius?*

He raised his head, blinking in confusion as he scanned the empty room.

*Over here. On the wall.*

Fluttering her wings, small and beautifully patterned in shades of orange, brown, and cream, she waited patiently for him to notice her.

"The moth?" he said out loud, his voice emerging as a raspy whisper.

*Emperor Moth*, she corrected, somewhat surprised as she did so. What was it about mundane details that was always so comforting in times of crisis? Maybe it was the sense of normalcy to be found there, the facade that this man might live on to remember something so trivial?

"Where's Crookshanks?"

*I left him just before we entered the castle.*

There was an awkward silence, and then Sirius said, "What happened, Lils? The last thing I remember, the dementors..." he paused and shuddered. "When I came back to consciousness, I was locked up in here."

*I didn't see most of it, she thought back at him. I went after Peter. Chased him halfway to Hogsmeade before I lost the scent. By the time I came back, the dementors were gone and Severus was conjuring stretchers for all of you. I don't know where Remus is, but Harry and the others are down in the hospital wing.*

"Snape?" Finally, a spark appeared in Sirius's eyes, but far from the kind she would've wanted to see. His words were cold, bitter, filled with resentment as he muttered, "Old Snivellus must be overjoyed right about now."

*Must you persist in calling him that? Schoolboy insults are a bit ridiculous at your age.*

Sirius snorted. “I see no reason to change when he’s exactly the same. Still skulking around, spying on people...”

*He was looking after the children, Sirius. That’s his job. And since one of those children happens to be mine, I can hardly find cause to criticize him for it.*

“Like Harry needs protection at the hands of that creepy old bat. He’s got plenty of others to watch out for him. People he can trust.”

If she’d been in human form, Lily would’ve raised an eyebrow at him. *Really? Like who?*

“Me! You and Remus, Dumbledore, the Weasleys, all the other teachers? I know you’ve always had a soft spot for Sniv...”

*Severus*, she cut him off with an irritated thought in his direction. *Or Snape, if you must.*

“Fine,” he said, pausing for an exaggerated sneer before he continued. “*Snape*. Anyway, my point still stands. Harry doesn’t need that greasy... he’s a Death Eater, you know. Probably knew about Peter all along. Wouldn’t be surprised if the old git helped him escape.”

*Peter escaped when Remus transformed. That’s hardly Severus’s fault.*

“Maybe not, but...” Rolling his eyes, Sirius cast about for a different line of attack. “You heard what he said to me. Nasty, spiteful...”

Lily struggled to maintain her patience, not wanting to squander these final moments on a pointless argument. Yes, Severus had been less than pleasant, to say the least, but in his defense, he’d had every reason to believe Sirius was a homicidal maniac. Perhaps he’d been unnecessarily smug about it, a bit more vicious than the situation had called for. But in light of everything she knew now, particularly that terrible incident with the werewolf, could he really be blamed for reacting so strongly?

Beyond that, Sirius hadn’t seen all the things she had over the years, didn’t know how much Severus had already done to protect her son. She might’ve pointed that out, but to do so would only highlight his long imprisonment in Azkaban, followed by the painful reminder that he was unlikely to be around to look out for Harry in the future. So instead, she simply responded with what she knew in that moment to be an absolute truth.

*I trust Severus.*

Sirius somehow managed to look both affronted and stunned. “Lily, are you mad?! Look, I know the two of you were friends when we were kids, but to trust him after what he turned out to be? He’s a *Death Eater*, for fuck’s sake! A Death Eater with a nasty temper, not to mention a grudge he’s obviously been harboring since...”

*I know what he is*, she thought back at him, unperturbed. *And far better than you do, I’m sure. I trust him, Sirius. Without question.*

“But what about the way he threatened me? What he said to Remus? He wanted us *dead*, Lily. Both of us! He’s a hateful son of a bitch, and not exactly what you might call ‘sane’ either. You’d really trust Harry — James’s son — with someone like that?”



Yes.

This time, he looked completely baffled. “Why?”

But she wasn’t going to tell him the truth, disclosing all those secret meetings with Dumbledore and the even more clandestine actions Severus had taken on Harry’s behalf over the years. No, there would be no mention of threats to her sister, nor those long summer nights of standing watch outside the little house on Privet Drive. She wouldn’t tell him how frequently Severus, and *only* Severus, pushed for additional security measures, emphasizing a need for caution that Dumbledore only ever met with sugarcoated condescension. Severus wouldn’t want him to know, and at any rate, Sirius would never believe her anyway.

Most of all, she wasn’t going to point out the striking similarities between the two men. Bad tempers? Anger management issues? Long-held grudges? Widely believed to be Death Eaters, though their allegiance lay somewhere else entirely? Honestly, it was rather hypocritical for Sirius to point fingers at Severus under the circumstances, but there was no need to mention that either. He would simply have to accept that he wasn’t going to change her mind on this.

*I have my reasons.*

Sirius, who’d been staring at her expectantly, let out an exasperated sigh. “Lils, you know James wouldn’t want...”

*No, she cut him off using the force of her mind. Don’t you dare bring James into this. I know you all hated each other, and it seems some of you still do. But I’ll tell you the same thing I told James all those years ago: don’t put me in the middle of it.*

“This isn’t about...”

*Like hell it isn’t. Look, I’m sorry, but I don’t make judgment calls based on a schoolboy grudge. Never have, never will.*

“It isn’t just... I’m only concerned for Harry, Lils. Surely you can’t blame me for that? He’s all I have left of James.”

Both the words and the quiet vulnerability with which they were spoken softened her, prompting her to leave the wall and alight on his shoulder. *Of course I don’t blame you. But I’m his mother, Sirius. I was willing to die to protect him, and I’d gladly do so all over again. I wouldn’t trust anyone with his safety if I had even the slightest suspicion they meant to do him harm. Surely you must realize that.*

He acknowledged her statement with a reluctant nod. “It’s not that I don’t trust you to know what’s best for Harry. But when it comes to Sniv... Snape, I just worry...”

*You’re worried that I’m blinded by my affection for him. Or the memory of it, at least.*

“Something like that.”

*Sirius... If she’d been in human form, she would’ve been chuckling at his serious expression. I cut Severus out of my life for six years because he hurt my pride. Do you really think I’d stand by and watch him hurt my son, just because I... But she didn’t know what she felt for Severus these days, or at least not how to put it into words. It was complicated, as things had always been with him, some good and some bad. And as always, it was private,*

certainly not open to the perusal of someone like Sirius, who would never understand Severus the way she did.

“No,” he muttered, finally admitting defeat. “But I still don’t like him. I still don’t trust him. And if he lays a finger on Harry...” He stopped short, his gaunt features twisting in an awful remembrance of his impending fate. “I’ll come back and haunt him. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do, and probably sooner rather than later. Really, how long can anyone continue to live without a... a soul?”

*Sirius...*

But the noises were growing louder, too close now to be ignored. Something — or *someone* — was coming, marked by repetitive thumping and the whistling of wind. It didn’t sound like the dementors, however, nor was there the sudden drop in temperature that would signal their approach. More than that, it was coming from the window, not the corridor that the Ministry officials would use.

“Lils,” Sirius hissed. “What the hell...?”

And then in a flash, he was out of his seat, struggling to open the latch. He cursed under his breath when it wouldn’t budge, which was followed by a muffled cry of, “*Alohomora!*” and the window flew open. And there was Harry with Hermione just behind him, astride a hippogriff that bore an uncanny resemblance to the one that had been executed just a few hours before. But there was no time to dwell on that, not even when Lily realized it was indeed the same creature. Sirius was already scrambling out the window, flinging himself across the hippogriff’s back, and then they were ascending at a breakneck speed to the tower above.

Lily paid little heed to the snatches of conversation that passed between Sirius and Harry, too stunned by a sudden and altogether distressing realization. In a matter of seconds, the only person who knew of her existence would be lost to her, unable to take the risk of coming anywhere near Hogwarts in the foreseeable future. *No*. No, she couldn’t do it.... couldn’t go back to that awful life of solitude. Besides, Sirius was her only hope of ever discovering the truth about what had happened to her on the night Voldemort had torn her life apart. And if there was even the faintest glimmer of hope that the spell could be reversed...

Later, she’d find plenty of ways to rationalize her decision. She’d be comforted by reminders of all the protection Harry had at his disposal, putting her faith in Severus, if no one else. She’d remind herself that Sirius was utterly alone, far more vulnerable, and that there was much more she could do for him than a son who was surrounded by friends and knew nothing of her presence in his life.

But for now, it was only mad desperation that prompted her to crawl into her old friend’s pocket, bracing herself for the uncertain future that would begin in an unknown destination.

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Severus had long since outgrown random acts of violence, preferring a handful of cutting words or just a brooding silence to get his point across. But tonight? Oh, tonight was a special exception.

*“Sectum Sempra!”* he snarled as he stalked through his private quarters, his wand flashing in jerky, haphazard motions as the furniture went to pieces beneath the force of his helpless rage. Any number of other spells would’ve worked just as well, of course, better in some cases. But if there was one thing Severus still appreciated in his miserable existence, it was irony.

And so he used only one particular incantation, originally designed by a boy who’d never dreamed it would only ever be a means to vent his helplessness, not an escape from it. He didn’t stop until his meager possessions were in ruins, and only did so then when he spied the crystal decanter that had somehow escaped his wrath. A drink... or seven or eight of them, to be more specific. Yes, that was exactly what he needed.

When Dumbledore found him, he was slumped heavily against the wall with the empty bottle still clutched in one hand. The older wizard raised an eyebrow, but seemed otherwise unperturbed as he shuffled through the debris, coming to stand directly in front of him. This surprised Severus — in the past, he’d always been obligated to visit the Headmaster’s office, not the other way around. Privately, he’d always assumed this was intended to highlight the difference in their station.

But now here Dumbledore was, towering over him with a serene expression on his careworn features. And though Severus might’ve been on his own territory this time, he’d never felt more inferior.

“Headmaster,” he acknowledged, cringing at the slight slur in his voice.

“Severus,” Dumbledore replied evenly. “It might be considered a breach of courtesy not to offer your guest a seat, but under the circumstances...” His lips twitched ever so slightly as he cast another glance around the shattered room, before taking it upon himself to conjure a pair of velvet armchairs.

Not bothering to wait for an invitation, Severus heaved himself up into the closest seat, scowling at the gaudy pattern of yellow and purple interspersed with lime green stripes. He soon found himself staring into a pair of expectant blue eyes, wondering through a haze of alcohol just what it was that the other man wanted. An apology? If that was the case, he’d be shit out of luck. Copious amounts of whiskey might’ve dulled Severus’s senses, bringing his boiling rage down to a low simmer. But it was still there just beneath the surface, and he sure as hell hadn’t drank enough to forget the reason for it either.

“Did they find him?” he muttered after a few tense moments, unable to think of anything else to say.

“No, they didn’t, thank Merlin. He should be well away from here by now, beyond any immediate danger.”

“Indeed,” Severus bit out, unable to control the sarcasm in his voice. “Let’s not worry about the rest of the Wizarding world... or the children under our charge, for that matter. As long as Black is free to commit additional atrocities, all is well.”

“Severus,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Sirius Black wasn’t responsible for those murders. He was not the one who exposed the Potters’s whereabouts either. I know there are hard feelings between you, but surely you’ll agree that an innocent man doesn’t deserve...”

“Innocent?! You’d take the word of a couple of children, *known troublemakers*, over hundreds of witnesses who never had any reason to fabricate the truth? Can’t you see what he’s done here, your precious prodigal Gryffindor? He’s filled their heads with *lies*! Not surprising that young Potter would believe it, the arrogant little fool. But *you*, Headmaster?”

“Yes.”

Severus stared at him in silence for a moment, baffled by the absolute certainty contained in that single word. “Headmaster, I...” he started, then trailed off in favor of a different approach. “May I remind you that...?”

“You can remind me of anything you like, but it changes nothing. Sirius is innocent, and his escape has prevented a terrible injustice from taking place right here at this school. In time, I hope you’ll be able to see that, too.”

Severus snorted. “Not likely.”

In a flash, Dumbledore’s demeanor changed, going from relaxed and tolerant to intense, almost urgent. “I know you don’t want to hear it, Severus, but you need to know the truth. And that truth mustn’t leave this room. If you still have any intention of fulfilling your vow...”

“That,” Severus interrupted, his voice low and deadly serious, “has never been under question. Make it as difficult for me as you like, let convicted murderers roam the halls of Hogwarts if there’s nothing I can do to convince you otherwise. But I will either fulfill my promise or die in the attempt. There is not, nor will there ever be, an alternative.”

Dumbledore nodded in approval, then launched into the story without further ado. Of course, Severus had overheard part of it in the Shrieking Shack, but it seemed better in this case to feign ignorance. Up until that moment, knowing the Marauders’s dirty little secret had done nothing to prove that Black wasn’t the murderer he appeared to be.

“Animagus?” he echoed a few minutes later, prepared with a different line of attack now that the previous one had been shattered to bits. “Unregistered Animagus? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“I’m not.”

“And you knew nothing of this? All these years...”

For the first time, the older wizard looked slightly uncomfortable. “I... had my suspicions.”

“Suspicions,” Severus repeated, tasting the word as if it were some foreign expression he’d never heard before. “So on top of bullying, countless instances of reckless behavior including attempted murder, and any number of other misdeeds, you also conveniently disregarded the wanton flaunting of Wizarding law?”

“Of course,” Dumbledore said mildly.

“Indeed... anything for your precious Gryffindors.”

“It isn’t that simple, Severus.” The Headmaster’s voice was still patient, but now there was an edge to it, making it abundantly clear that he wouldn’t tolerate much more in the way of

accusation. "Not everything is black and white. I hope you come to understand that someday. At any rate, I never knew for sure. Not until Sirius confirmed it himself just this evening."

"Innocent of one crime, guilty of another," Severus said, wishing he hadn't already killed off the last of his whiskey. A drink would be quite useful in helping him adjust to this strange new reality... a reality that, as loath as he was to admit it, rang of truth. Too many past recollections were fitting into place now, too many instances of odd behaviors that led to this as the most logical explanation.

"Sometimes the motivations matter more than the crime itself," Dumbledore responded after a moment. "Maybe you can't see it, but those boys did what they did for unselfish reasons, in service to a friend. Even if I'd known beyond a shadow of a doubt, I couldn't have, and will never penalize them for that."

Severus let out a sigh of surrender, too weary to fight another futile battle. "Very well, Headmaster," he said quietly, fixing the other man with an unreadable look. "What would you have me do?"

If Dumbledore was surprised by this abrupt show of submission, he didn't show it. "Well," he said in a thoughtful voice, reaching up to stroke his beard. "You can start by putting your quarters to rights, and perhaps sober up before class tomorrow if you can manage it. Following that, I can't think of any immediate concerns."

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Severus said, "No, I was talking about this situation with Black and Lupin. Am I meant to just pretend...?"

"They may never be your friends, but they are our allies. You'll just have to find a way to get along with them, I suppose." Dumbledore had risen to his feet by then, surprising him with a gentle hand on the shoulder. "I know this is far from easy for you, Severus, and I'm sorry for it. But we must learn to trust one another. Otherwise, we doom ourselves to failure."

With a curt nod, Severus pushed himself up from his seat, remembering his manners well enough to at least make an attempt to show his unexpected guest to the door.

"Don't worry, I can see myself out. Get some rest and we'll speak again soon."

"Very well. Good night, Headmaster."

The comforting silence that followed the older man's departure was short-lived, interrupted when he ducked his head back in the room with a suspicious twinkle in his eye. "Oh, and Severus? Please feel free to keep the chairs."

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The few remaining days of the school year passed without incident, finally giving Severus the opportunity to breathe a sigh of relief. He'd revealed Lupin's true nature, obligating him to resign and slink away like the coward he was. No fucking Marauders left to torment him with a slew of painful memories... or put him through the less than pleasant experience of creating new ones. Even Pettigrew, the one he hadn't even known about, was far away, no doubt scrounging for food in some miserable sewer somewhere.

Severus wasn't happy, exactly. He'd long since forgotten the meaning of that word. Nonetheless, this time seemed like a respite somehow, a chance to regroup before the

foundations of his existence were shaken all over again. What he needed was time to rest and recuperate, having come to the realization that he couldn't hope to make it through what lay ahead if he was wrung dry before it even came to pass.

And so he started with his private quarters, disposing of the splintered furniture along with Dumbledore's tacky chairs, then replacing them with amenities that were just a little better than the ones he'd previously owned. The bed was somewhat larger, just a touch softer, chairs slightly more comfortable than their predecessors. When summer ended, he'd be returning to tolerable living conditions that even bordered on cozy, but before then...

The impulse didn't make sense on a conscious level, but it felt right somehow. Rather than going home to Spinner's End, he found himself at the Ministry inquiring after available Portkeys, followed by an impromptu holiday in Switzerland, of all places. But perhaps that was symbolic... this was a chance to forget the impending war, to set aside his numerous internal conflicts and just *be* for a while. And although he wasn't entirely successful in those efforts, the long days of silence and solitude, fully undisturbed weeks where he forced himself *not* to read *The Daily Prophet*, gave him more solace than he'd felt in more years than he could count.

And that was a fortunate thing, for this was to be the cloudy sky before the lightning struck, the last opportunity to opt for peace rather than a perpetual state of calamity.

## 18. Claiming Trust

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### Chapter 18: Claiming Trust

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Severus was still in Switzerland when the Dark Mark started to burn.

It was only mild discomfort, a momentary prickle compared with the terrible searing sensation that would've indicated a summons from the Dark Lord. The effect was the same, however, jarring him awake with a sharp gasp as he scrambled for his wand and uttered a raspy, "Lumos" into the darkness.

The change would've been imperceptible to the untrained eye, but all too obvious to a man who'd spent years both hoping for and dreading this moment. Slightly darker, yes, the macabre design etched just a little more clearly into the pale skin of his forearm. And with that, Severus let out a weary sigh, heaving himself out of bed and padding over to the kitchen. Pausing a minute for a sip of strong black coffee, he gathered his meager possessions, determined to catch the next available Portkey.

When Dumbledore's urgent missive arrived, he was already gone.

Back at Spinner's End, he awaited orders from one side or the other, pacing the floor until the latest issue of *The Daily Prophet* showed up. SCENES OF TERROR AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP, the headline screamed at him, accompanied by a photograph of the Dark Mark emblazoned across the summer sky. His heart plummeted to his boots, but then he was out of his chair, cursing under his breath as he flung a handful of floo powder into the decrepit fireplace.

"Severus," Dumbledore acknowledged a moment later, his tone unusually somber. "Where have you been?"

Ignoring the question, Severus held out the paper in his hand, waiting for an explanation.

"Yes, the Ministry is in an uproar. As I'm sure you've read..."

Severus nodded impatiently. "I've read it. Now tell me what I don't know."

---

Having once fantasized about spending her holidays on a tropical island, Lily was disappointed that the experience wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Of course, her teenage daydreams had involved bikinis and suntan oil, reclining on the beach sipping delicious cocktails. She'd never imagined being trapped in the body of an ostentatious parrot, being gawked at by tourists while dealing with a man who prowled around the island like a caged animal.

Granted, she understood Sirius's frustrations better than anyone, knew how maddening it was to feel helpless. But after a while, she couldn't help resenting his outbursts. While his situation wasn't ideal, he had a lot of significant advantages over her. He could speak directly to Harry or anyone else he chose, could write letters she flew hundreds of miles to deliver. And while his physical appearance would always reflect the trials he'd suffered in Azkaban, at least his body was still his own.

Sirius took full advantage of this fact, a discovery Lily made on a balmy July night when she returned early from a nocturnal hunting expedition. She alighted on the windowsill of the bungalow, only to be half mortified, half hypnotized as she gazed down at the pair of naked bodies moving together beneath the moonlight. Such a beautiful, otherworldly thing... bare flesh as pale as pearls contrasted with the rich mahogany hue of an island native. Lily didn't even attempt to look away as she'd done with Severus years before. No, the need had become too great, loneliness pulsing through her in perfect time with the couple's soft sounds of pleasure.

She was humiliated the following morning, determined to avoid intruding on private moments in the future. But the incident stayed with her nonetheless, a sharp, painful reminder of everything she was missing and might never have again. The ability to touch, to be touched, to find comfort and satisfaction in another person's arms...

Yes, sometimes it was far easier to envy Sirius than it was to sympathize with him.

As August melted into September, another letter arrived from Harry, hinting there might be trouble on the horizon. She'd sworn not to let Sirius do anything reckless, but what if her son was in real danger? There were plenty of people to look after him, far better than she could, but that was hardly the point. She missed him desperately, couldn't stand being away for even a moment longer. Sirius would be putting his freedom, perhaps even his life at risk, but there was no other choice.

They needed to go home.

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"Come in, Severus. Would you like a pastry?"

"No, Headmaster. Thank you."

Nodding at an empty chair, the older wizard licked powdered sugar from his fingertips with soft sounds of relish. "The house elves have outdone themselves in their efforts to please our guests. These little puffs — quite delightful, really. Seems a shame to miss out."

"I'm not hungry," Severus said with studied patience as he settled himself into the offered seat.

"Perhaps you'll take some tea then?"

"Very well."

Despite everything, Severus found it difficult to hate these meetings. Granted, the end result was bound to be unpleasant, but almost worth it for the companionable silence that preceded it, a sense of peace he rarely found anywhere else. It was an illusion, of course, no doubt orchestrated to lull him into submission. But he couldn't help enjoying it while it



lasted. Just to pretend that his was a different life... that he was simply taking tea with a friend rather than waiting to serve a deceptively pleasant and capricious master? How could that not be comforting?

Today, however, it seemed his reprieve was to be a short one.

"Now that Harry will be participating in the tournament," Dumbledore started as the steaming cup slid across the desk, "Mr. Black no longer feels it is appropriate to remain in exile."

"He prefers a quick trip back to Azkaban?" Severus said dryly, earning himself a reproving look. "Well, I have no objection."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Severus, but I'm not going to let that happen. Sirius Black is our ally, and as such..."

"As such, you want my word that I won't reveal his whereabouts." Electing for a facade of boredom rather than exposing his swiftly growing irritation, Severus stifled a yawn. "As you wish, Headmaster. Will that be all?"

Dumbledore looked faintly amused, which was never a good sign. "Not quite."

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Half an hour later, Severus was in a towering fury. Fucking typical. Half a dozen other people could've been trusted with this job, but when had that ever been the point? He was the whipping boy, vulnerabilities and resentments forever at the mercy of one who seemed to take delight in placing him in the worst possible situations. Fucking Dumbledore, always eager to push him to his limits and beyond. The man was a sadist, perhaps even more so than the Dark Lord at times. At least the latter had a simple approach, surprisingly fair for a sociopathic lunatic. Do what was expected and be rewarded. Fail and be punished.

Not that he hated the Dark Lord any less. Lily's murderer could've been a benevolent saint in every other way and Severus would still wish a slow and excruciating death upon him. It was just unnerving to realize that his two masters weren't quite as different as they appeared to be.

The parcels were waiting in his office. Oh, how tempting it was to spit in the food, or perhaps apply an itching hex to the blankets. But as had been the case with Lupin and his bloody Wolfsbane potion, Severus knew very well that Dumbledore was testing him. And so he did nothing, just shrank the items and stuffed them in his pockets before setting off for Hogsmeade.

As it turned out, the cave was easy to find. Having already cast a Disillusionment charm upon himself, Severus approached silently, determined to take his nemesis by surprise and hopefully scare the wits out of him.

Sirius was in human form, sitting against the wall of the cave. It was an unpleasant place, small and cramped, smelling faintly of mildew and rotting vegetation. Or maybe it was Black himself who was giving off that odor? Severus wouldn't have been surprised — the man was filthy.

As he moved closer, it became apparent that Sirius was talking to himself. Had he truly gone mad then? Not that Severus would've felt a trace of sympathy, of course, but mental instability could prove problematic if Dumbledore was feeding him sensitive information. Was he even capable of keeping a secret?

"Maybe you're right," he was saying. "But you know, James always thought that..."

Coming to a stop just a couple steps away, Severus smiled. "Talking to ghosts?" he said in a silky purr as he dropped the charm.

Black actually screamed, which was intensely gratifying. His face was chalk white, his eyes bulging out to a comical degree as he stared up at the tall figure looming over him. Well, he hadn't pissed himself, but this reaction was good enough. For now.

"Good thing I cast a quick Muffliato," Severus said casually. "The residents of Hogsmeade already assume the Shrieking Shack is haunted thanks to that beastly friend of yours. No need to feed any rumors that banshees might be about as well."

"What do you want, Snivellus?"

"First, you will refrain from calling me that. Second..."

Sirius glowered up at him. "Oh yeah? Or what?"

"To begin with, I have a wand and you don't. I also happen to know the exact location of a dangerous fugitive... information that the Ministry would no doubt find to be of great interest. It would be so easy to let something slip..."

"You've always been a bastard, Sniv... Snape."

"Likewise," Severus responded almost pleasantly. He was enjoying the fear in the other man's eyes, the almost palpable awareness of his vulnerable position. Perhaps this wasn't such a bad job after all — indeed, he might even have to thank Dumbledore for it later.

"What do you want?" Sirius repeated with a scowl. "Or more accurately, what do I have to do to make you leave?"

"Your impatience seems rather misplaced. Unlike you, I'm the one who actually has better things to do tonight. There's a good meal and a warm bed waiting for me back at Hogwarts. Perhaps a hot bath, too, if I feel so inclined. Yes, I'll have to see about that... after I deliver these packages." Withdrawing them and increasing them to their normal size, he dropped them carelessly on the ground. "Dumbledore sends his regards."

And then something unexpected happened — Severus felt a twinge of sympathy as Black withdrew the food and tore into it like a starving animal. It was only a fleeting thing, smashed to bits by the next comment, but unnerving nonetheless.

"So did you poison it?" Sirius muttered around a mouthful of bread. "I wouldn't be surprised."

"Maybe." Severus shrugged, brushing an invisible speck off his sleeve. "Too late now, at any rate. You should really be more careful."

Without another word, he Apparated to the edge of town, then strode back to Hogwarts with a satisfied smile on his lips.

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“Lils?”

*I’m here.* She flitted down from the ceiling of the cave, alighting on Sirius’ shoulder. Despite his furious expression, he looked better than he had in days. The food had restored some color to his face and he was no longer shivering, having discovered the thick fleece blanket which he’d wrapped snugly around his thin body.

“Fucking Snivellus. Why did Dumbledore have to send *him* of all people?”

*Because Severus can be trusted. And please don’t call him that — you know it bothers me.*

Sirius snorted. “That greasy git would betray our side in a heartbeat if it worked to his advantage. I know you have a soft spot for him, Lils. Apparently Dumbledore does, too... God knows why. But he’s not who you think he is. All he’s ever cared about is himself.”

*You’re wrong.*

“Am I? Wait and see. Wait until You-Know-Who returns, then see if your precious Snivellus is still skulking about making Wolfsbane potion and doing Dumbledore’s grunt work. Oh no, he’ll turn traitor again before you can...”

**STOP CALLING HIM THAT!**

Surprised by her vehemence, Sirius froze before letting out a heavy sigh. “All right, fine. But I really wish you wouldn’t do this to yourself, Lils. He doesn’t deserve your kindness. He never did.”

*He doesn’t deserve your hatred!*

“What?! Oh, come on... you saw the way he just treated me. How can you defend that?”

Lily studied him for a moment, gazing at him through her tiny insect eyes. *After everything you did to him...*

“Ancient history.”

*And yet it never occurs to you to apologize, to try and make amends for the past. You can’t leave a wound to fester and expect it to heal on its own.*

“He gave as good as he got!” Sirius exploded, looking almost deranged. “What the hell do I have to apologize for?”

*Nearly getting him killed might be a good place to start.*

“The Shrieking Shack?” Briefly, he looked uncomfortable, but that was soon replaced by a stubborn, almost petulant expression. “Hell, that was just a joke. Anyway, it wouldn’t have happened in the first place if he hadn’t always been creeping around looking for reasons to have us expelled. It was his own damn fault.”

Lily stared at him in silence, torn between sadness and helpless fury. For the first time, she completely understood what Severus had been talking about when he'd gone on and on about precious Gryffindors who could do no wrong. This was the price of that favoritism... the fact that Sirius could've put someone in mortal danger yet feel no remorse for having done so. Why should he, when he'd been taught that it was just another minor transgression to be excused away, having no lasting consequences?

It led her to wonder what else had been swept under the rug during their school years. Just how much had Dumbledore been aware of, turning a blind eye because of who was involved? She'd never known of Severus to have reported any incidents, had always assumed it was pride that had made him hold his silence. But what if it had been more than that... the realization that help wouldn't have been given even if he'd asked for it?

Either way, she now realized that Dumbledore had failed both boys in completely different ways. Ancient history? Right. Nearly 20 years later, and they were both still paying the price for that neglect. It was just a shame that only one could see it for what it was. The other? It was both tragic and amazing that he could have endured so much — the loss of his best friend, all those years in prison — while never having evolved past the mentality of an overprivileged adolescent boy.

Sirius, I... But what would be the point of continuing the argument? She couldn't force him to recognize what he was clearly unwilling to see. The futility depressed her, as did thoughts of Severus, who'd been far more alone than she'd ever realized. And that hadn't changed, had it? Still friendless and unhappy, still trivialized by Dumbledore even when he had every reason to feel the way he did. Sirius would be all right — he'd always have his defenders, people to love him and tell him everything would be okay. But Severus?

"What is it, Lils?"

*I... I think we — you — should tell Severus the truth. About me.*

He stared at her, aghast. "You're out of your fucking mind."

*I trust him, Sirius. I know you don't understand my reasons, but I do. He would never betray me.*

"Right. You refuse to let me tell Dumbledore, the wisest and most trustworthy wizard we've ever known, yet you want me to reveal your secret to that... that... bloody hell, what the fuck are you thinking?!"

*I'm thinking about what's best for me. Will you do it?*

Sirius shook his head vehemently. "Not in a million years. Even if he would believe me, which is highly doubtful, this is foolishness. I won't let you put yourself at risk just because you have some weird attachment to the greasy bastard. I owe James more than that."

*This has nothing to do with James.*

"Like hell it doesn't! He would never forgive me if..."

*I'm not James' property! she thought at him furiously. Or yours! I may not look like it, but I'm a grown woman. I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions, and I want Severus to know the truth!*

Sirius shot her a scathing look. “Not going to happen, Lily. Not through me. You can hate me if you want, but I’m not putting you at the mercy of a fucking Death Eater. No way in hell.”

*You can’t just...* But there was no point in completing the thought.

She left him without another word, desperate to be away from him, eager to find another solution. It had been all well and good to take her time when she’d assumed he’d help her reveal the truth when she was ready. Clearly, that wasn’t the case. Arrogant, stubborn fool. What gave him the right to make this decision for her, to ignore what she felt was best for herself? God, she’d been an idiot... stupid to wait so long, foolish to believe that James wouldn’t be the primary motivation in everything Sirius chose to do. That was all she’d ever been to him, wasn’t it? Not a person in her own right, only an extension of her former husband.

That obsessive, maddening loyalty. There’d been a time when she’d admired it. Now it just felt like a trap.

She could feel the confines of that trap closing in around her as she flew toward Hogwarts, heavy and stifling. For so long, she’d hesitated, holding her silence out of fear of the unknown. That feeling was gone now, but what was there to replace it? The suddenly overwhelming need to be seen and heard, yes, but how was she supposed to make that happen?

Minerva? No. Another Animagus was the most obvious choice, but the Deputy Headmistress was too close to Dumbledore. Despite her change of heart, instinct still told Lily that the old headmaster must not know. She’d become far too aware of Dumbledore’s manipulative behavior, how he used others to his advantage and sometimes even his amusement. Severus was proof of that, as was Harry, who’d repeatedly had his capabilities tested far beyond what any child should have to endure. Trusting her former hero was no longer an option, nor was she willing to sacrifice the advantage she had in being able to observe him unawares.

No, if she was to reveal herself to anyone, it had to be Severus. He’d keep her secret, would take it to the grave if she asked it of him. Beyond that, he was one of the few wizards who possessed both the knowledge and the skill to help her out of this situation if it was possible to do so. Yes, and probably the *only* one who wouldn’t do so with a hidden agenda. It wouldn’t be because she’d been married to his best friend or might prove advantageous in the coming war. With Severus, love would be the only motivation... the only one she could trust anymore.

As comforting as that was, however, it still didn’t solve the larger problem. How was she supposed to let him know?

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Severus had no idea where the bloody cat had come from. It had just shown up in his private quarters one night, and he hadn’t been able to get rid of it since.

The first assumption had naturally been that it belonged to one of the students, but all his queries to that effect had proven otherwise. Not an Animagus either — he’d tested that theory

after he'd come out of the shower to find the creature staring at him rather intently. That hadn't been so unusual on its own, but the way it had quickly averted its eyes with a look of shame had been strange, almost human. But the spell had revealed nothing, only another odd moment where he'd fancied that the cat seemed disappointed that it hadn't worked.

That led Severus to the conclusion that he was imagining things, no doubt the effect of too much stress and far too little sleep. To say his year wasn't going well would be an understatement — strangers in the castle, the Dark Mark giving him constant cause for concern, and bloody Potter competing in this damned tournament. As if trying to keep the boy alive wasn't difficult enough without throwing dragons and underwater terrors into the mix.

Still, there was only one task left, and he really didn't mind his new companion. She was a pretty thing, sweet and pleasant, a calico with large green eyes. Indeed, it hadn't taken him long to start borrowing cat food from Filch, and the matter of whether she'd sleep in his bed had ceased to be a battle of wills after the first couple nights. These days, he usually awoke to her stretched luxuriously across his chest or snuggled up against his side. It was... comforting.

But sometimes, she left him with a peculiar feeling, as if there were some hidden truth he couldn't quite put his finger on. The way she would look at him sometimes, those feline eyes seeming to beg for something he didn't understand. She was sensitive to his moods, too, far more so than any animal he'd ever encountered. When he'd had a bad day (well, worse than usual), she went out of her way to be extra affectionate. But what was even more strange was how she dealt with his temper. He could be furious with Dumbledore and she'd stare at him with sympathetic eyes... and yet the day he'd become incensed with Potter over raiding his private stores, she'd scratched him, then refused to sleep in his bed for several days.

He questioned his sanity in thinking so, but it really was like living with a woman.

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Lily was at a loss.

For months, she'd lived in close quarters with Severus, with the exception of occasional forays to check on Harry or brief visits to the cave above Hogsmeade. Unfortunately, she was no closer to a solution.

She'd made numerous attempts to convince Sirius to intervene on her behalf, but those had come to nothing. Each time the subject came up, he only seemed to grow more obstinate, more determined to shield her existence from his nemesis. As a result, they weren't exactly getting along these days. She still felt obligated to visit him, of course, but was always relieved to return to the relative peace of Severus' quarters.

Severus... once she'd decided he should know the truth, it had become something of an obsession. She'd briefly considered spelling out a message like she'd done in her sister's kitchen all those years before. But what could she say? How could she possibly hope to phrase it where he wouldn't assume it was some cruel practical joke?

No, she needed something more substantial, something that wouldn't be immediately discarded by a man who was cynical by nature.

Meanwhile, she'd run out of time, at least as far as this school year was concerned. It was already June, and even now, she was preparing to go into the maze with her son for the third and final task. She'd been there for all of them, though he'd never know it... indeed, she was quite proud of how he'd risen to the challenges he'd been given so far and didn't expect this one to be any different.

Oh, but it was. Nobody noticed the moth fluttering frantically through the maze after the boys had disappeared. Nobody saw her alight on Harry's shoulder as soon as he returned, sobbing in anguish beside the broken body of his friend. But she was there nonetheless, shaken to the core by the harsh whisper that escaped his lips.

"He's back. He's back. Voldemort."

And just like that, the world was plunged into darkness.

## 19. Suspicions

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### Chapter 19: Suspicions

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Lily hated 12 Grimmauld Place, though the fact that it was dank and depressing, stank of mildew, and hadn't had a good dusting in a century had little to do with her feelings. She'd spent time in worse places, after all, especially during all the years she'd lived as an animal.

But nowhere else she'd been had made her feel so unwelcome, as if the walls themselves had absorbed the prejudices of countless generations. The house reeked of Pureblood superiority, far more odorous than the piles of old garbage she'd had to navigate around during her first few days. Under any other circumstances, she would've made her excuses and looked for somewhere else to stay, but this was the only place where she had access to two crucial things.

The Black family library was renowned throughout the Wizarding world, a massive collection containing some of the rarest, most ancient magical books to be found. If there was any chance of discovering a counterspell for whatever enchantment Voldemort had cast on her, she'd have a better chance of finding it here than anywhere else.

And of course, she needed Sirius to help her go through those books, being as he was the only person who knew about her situation and could communicate with her directly.

"You know, Lils," he said with a smirk. "I could always get a pet monkey. Then you could switch to it and go through some of these yourself. Opposable thumbs and all."

*Very funny*, she thought back at him with no small amount of sarcasm.

"Oh, come on. It's not a *bad* idea."

*And how would you explain that to the Order members? Just woke up one day and decided you had to have a monkey?*

"Sure, why not? They already think I'm cracked. Doubt they'd raise an eyebrow." He chuckled, but it was a humorless sound that did nothing to hide his bitterness.

That was the other reason Lily hated Grimmauld Place — from the moment they'd stepped through the door, Sirius's mood had taken a nosedive, even darker than right after his escape when he *had* been a little mad. He did his best to put on a brave face for the others, but it was palpable... as if one wrong word might send him spiraling off the deep end.

*I think I'll just stay a cat for now if it's all the same to you.*

Sirius shrugged. "Fair enough. It was just a suggestion."

*Have you found anything?*

"Not since you asked me five minutes ago."



*Sorry. I just feel like I'm running out of time.*

"Because of You-Know-Who?"

Lily jumped down from her perch on the windowsill, coming to sit at his feet. *Yes, I suppose so. That and everything else.* Sirius didn't ask her to elaborate, so after a few minutes had passed, she changed the subject. *You'll want to finish up soon. Remus will be popping his head in if you stay up here much longer. We don't want him wondering why you're shut up in your bedroom reading...* She paused, squinting at the book which was bound in blood red leather. *Dark Magic to Lighten the Mood. Hmmm... sounds like a real page turner.*

"We could just tell him the truth, you know."

*I already told you that was out of the question.*

"And yet you wanted to tell Sniv..." He stopped himself as she made a low hissing sound. "Tell *Snape*. Whatever. I still don't get it, Lils. Why him and not Remus? One is the kindest, most loyal friend we've ever had. The other is..."

*Someone I trust. Look, Sirius, I'm not having this conversation again. I trust Severus. I don't expect you to understand why, and I'm certainly not asking you to agree with me, but I have my reasons. And if you would just tell him about me...*

"Never." Sirius slammed the book shut, plunking it down on the table next to his armchair before reaching for a smaller one. "I'll tell Remus. Dumbledore, the Weasleys, you name it. I'll tell Harry himself if you like. But *Snape*? No way in hell."

She glared at him for a moment, then turned and stalked away. How long had she been here? A few weeks? Every day was just the same, filled with useless arguments along with a search that was beginning to seem equally pointless. Voldemort had probably invented the spell himself, never bothering with a counter curse. And while it was true that most things were reversible, knowing *something* about the original spell was crucial in figuring out how to get around it.

Then again, Sirius had only been through perhaps a tenth of the books they had at their disposal. Far too soon to give up, but that was the thing about Grimmauld Place. It had a way of sucking the hope right out of a person.

As such, she was hardly expecting the sharp gasp Sirius let out a few minutes later, followed by a whisper of, "My God, Lily. I think I've found something."

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All things considered, Severus supposed he'd been lucky. Voldemort had accepted his excuses as to why it had taken him hours to respond to that initial summons, had even praised him for maintaining his cover for so many years. Far preferable to what had happened to some of the other Death Eaters, many of whom were still out of commission thanks to the tortures their master had inflicted upon them.

Meanwhile, Severus was enjoying a new level of prestige among the Dark Lord's followers. No need to worry about being forced to participate in random acts of brutality — Voldemort was keeping a low profile for the time being, and at any rate, Severus was highly valued for the intelligence he could provide. Indeed, his master had cautioned him against

taking unnecessary risks, and had wasted no time in informing the other Death Eaters that no harm was to come to him.

How long he'd be able to count on such a reprieve was another matter, but for the time being, it was... reassuring. Rather more comforting, in fact, than what he encountered at Grimmauld Place when he was obligated to put in an appearance.

Not that anyone mistreated him. On the contrary, they went out of their way to extend every courtesy. But Severus could feel it just beneath the surface — lingering suspicion regarding his true allegiance, muscles tensed in preparation to strike should he prove false. Oddly enough, Black was the easiest to deal with — unlike the other Order members, he didn't go to any trouble to hide his hostility.

Besides, Sirius was at a disadvantage and they both knew it, which gave Severus no small amount of pleasure. There he was, trapped in that miserable house, unable to do a damn thing to help the war effort. Tragic, and yet no less than he deserved for a lifetime of arrogance, or the years upon years he'd spent treating Severus as if his very existence was worth less than nothing.

Indeed, who was worthless now? If they managed to prevail, Severus would be instrumental in winning the war, a bitter reality Black would have to live with for the rest of his life. Oh, and let it be a long one if that were the case.

Perhaps there was no need to taunt him — impotent frustration hung over him like a shroud whether Severus provoked him or not. It might not even be the wisest thing to do, being as Sirius must be looking for any excuse to commit some mindlessly stupid act of bravery that would likely get him killed. But Severus couldn't help himself — even when he attempted to be civil, his efforts were met by snide remarks, or at the very least, a contemptuous stare.

So why deprive himself of a perfectly good outlet for his frustrations? Not like Sirius was useful for much else these days, and Severus had few enough pleasures in his life. Might as well make the most out of this one.

*“Blood traitor! Filth! Desecrating the home of my ancestors, the most noble house of...”*

“Fuck off,” Severus snarled. He paused to jerk the curtains over the portrait he'd inadvertently disturbed, his efforts made significantly easier by the incantation he muttered under his breath.

“How the hell did you do that?”

He looked up to see Black standing at the top of the stairs, scowling down at him as if he was just itching to go for his wand. Well, let him try it. One of the perks of being around the Death Eaters again was that Severus had picked up a few new curses. Not that he'd had any intention of using them, of course, but he could always make an exception.

“I used a spell,” he said with a smirk. “Obviously.”

“What spell?”

“One of my own.”

Descending the steps, Sirius gave him a suspicious look. "So last week when the entire house was in an uproar, when we couldn't get the old bint to shut her bloody mouth... *you* said you had no idea how to..."

Severus tried not to snicker as he pictured the scene — Black shrieking with an outrage to rival his mother's, Lupin standing there ashen faced, as ineffectual as ever as Mrs. Black called him a mutant and a freak. "I enjoyed hearing what she had to say."

"Well, that's the one thing I can say for my mother: at least she wasn't a hypocrite."

"Indeed?" Severus took a step closer. "The implication being that I am?"

"You tell me."

Sirius looked as if he was about to say something else, but hesitated as a small creature came slinking into the room. Immediately recognizing the cat, the same little calico that had spent so much time in his quarters during the previous school year, Severus frowned. He'd looked all over for her on that final day, disappointed when he'd been unable to find her. How the hell had she come to be *here* of all places? Part of him wanted to ask, but not so much that he was willing to give Sirius the impression that he gave a damn.

"Where is everyone?" he said instead. "I'm expected to give a report this afternoon."

"Why should I need to tell you where they are? You're the master spy."

Determined not to lose what little patience he had left, Severus strode into the adjacent room and pointed his wand at an armchair, muttering a pointed *Scourgify* before taking a seat. "Very well," he said almost pleasantly. "I'll just wait here until they return."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "You could just give *me* the report, you know."

"I could do a lot of things. That doesn't mean I will."

"You really are the most... *get back over here!*"

Severus tensed as the cat jumped into his lap, immediately relaxing when he saw that Sirius was none too happy with this new development. Taken a liking to her, too, had he? Well, too bad for him. She'd made her preference all too clear if the purring was any indication. Unable to help himself, he gave her a scratch under the chin.

"Put her down." Petty jealousy was to be expected, perhaps, but the intensity in Sirius's voice was surprising.

"She seems quite comfortable where she is."

"Put her down, Snape. Now."

"No."

Sirius lunged, but Severus was faster. In a flash, he had Sirius on the floor, wand out and pressed against the other man's jugular.

"Was that really necessary?" Sirius growled, and it took Severus a minute to realize he was addressing the cat, who'd managed to inflict a nasty scratch on his cheek before fleeing to the other side of the room. She seemed almost... *smug*, giving Sirius a look that said 'serves you

right' before lifting her paw for a thorough cleaning. Again, Severus was struck by the impression that there was something almost human about the creature.

And then out of nowhere, it hit him.

"That's not a cat."

He could've sworn Sirius turned a shade paler. "What? Get the hell off me, Snivellus!"

Refusing to budge, he repeated himself, drawing out every syllable with relish. "You heard me. I said, 'that's not a cat.'"

"Looks like a bloody cat to me!"

"Quoth the Animagus."

"Have you gone round the twist? Get the hell off me, you creepy bastard, or I'll..."

"Or you'll what? Call for help? About the only thing you can do under the circumstances as far as I can see. And even that..." He flashed Sirius a menacing smile, then whispered, "*Muffliato*."

Sirius looked almost frightened now, which was gratifying. "She's not an Animagus. Just an ordinary cat. See for yourself."

"Oh, I intend to." He turned toward the cat, surprised to find her sitting right behind him. Of course, he'd attempted the spell once before to no effect, ignoring the fact that it normally required two or more Wizards to be effective. Perhaps he'd underestimated his power — rare, but possible. 'I intend to,' he repeated more slowly. "And *you* will assist me."

Sirius snorted. "Hardly."

With a shrug, Severus said, "Fine. I suppose I'll just have to speak with Dumbledore then, inform him of my suspicions. I'm sure it will interest him to know that you seem to be harboring an unknown..."

"*All right!* All right, we'll do the fucking spell. Now get the hell off of me so I can reach my wand."

Severus rose to his feet, easily deflecting the hex that was flung his way. "Nice try," he said with a smirk. "Now if you're quite finished, shall we?"

"If you're that eager to be proven wrong, who am I to stop you?" Black seemed oddly cheerful all of a sudden, which aroused Severus's suspicions. But when the spell was cast, perfectly synchronized on the count of three, he felt the surge of magic from the man standing beside him, saw the flare of brilliant blue light that was nearly as powerful as his own. And then... nothing. The cat was still a cat, staring up at them with an expression that seemed curiously disappointed. Did cats even make faces? Well, this one did. Her eyes, round and bright, more vivid than Slytherin green, were pleading with him to do something. What, he didn't know, but he was certain now that this wasn't just a figment of his imagination.

"Ha!" Sirius shouted in triumph. "See? Just a cat. What do you think of that, you greasy git?"

"I think," Severus said in a low hiss, stepping closer so that their faces were only inches apart, "that you're a bloody liar. There's something more to that cat, and you can be damn sure I'm going to figure out what it is."

"Oh yeah? And just how do you propose to...?"

*"Legilimens!"*

Mercy was the last thing on Severus's mind as he plundered through Black's head. Quite the opposite, in fact, as he was bombarded by countless memories, each more nauseating than the last. It was an intentional assault, he realized, struggling to maintain his focus as he saw his younger self presented in various states of misery. Struck down by a hex, struggling not to cry out in pain as his tormentors mocked him with a smug Sirius right at the forefront. Lily... dear god, Lily... young and beautiful, smiling as she came closer, closer... a vision of perfection that was snatched away, immediately replaced by one of Lily and Potter. This memory cut him to shreds — the kind of thing he'd spent twenty years trying not to think about and certainly hadn't ever wanted to see. Lily sprawled out on the grass in the Forbidden Forest — head thrown back, eyes closed, skirt pushed up around her waist as James's hand worked furiously between her legs.

Gritting his teeth, he shielded himself, which was a good thing since Black was far from finished with him. Again he saw Lily and Potter, this time tangled up in blood red Gryffindor sheets... sighing, moaning, writhing together in the semi darkness. The view was somewhat obstructed, as if the observer had been watching from behind a door that was slightly ajar, perhaps, or through some crevice in the wall. It was a blessing in one way, but also meant that...

Abruptly, Severus broke the connection. "You bloody pervert. And you call *me* a creep? Tell me, did she know you were there? Did you ever tell her the truth?"

Sirius looked extremely uncomfortable, as if he'd just realized he'd made a drastic mistake. "I made it all up. Best thing I could think of to get you the fuck out of my head, you miserable..."

Severus shook his head, lifting his wand again. "No. You are not so skilled in Occlumency that you could falsify anything so realistic. Certainly not on the fly. You watched her. With *him*, you watched her. How many times, Black? Did you do it on your own, or were you and Potter in on it together? Yes, I suppose you were. That's just the sort of thing..."

"James knew nothing about it," Sirius snarled, seeming to regain some of his composure. Oddly, he kept glancing back and forth between Severus and the cat, like he was fearful of them both.

"Indeed?" And then without warning, Severus struck like a snake. This time he was ruthless, plundering through memories like some savage Viking marauder until he found the one he was looking for. Potter and Black materialized in his consciousness, standing just a few yards away from the Whomping Willow. The former was speaking emphatically as the latter held his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

*"Really, Prongs, it was no big deal. Just a little peek, you know?"*

*"That's not the point! Some things are private!"*

The younger version of Black floundered, then said, *“Well, what about Marlene? You and Remus were right there in the Common Room when she undid my trousers and started...”*

*“Not the same thing,”* said Potter, shaking his head emphatically. *“Not the same at all, and you know it. Marlene knew we were there, and besides, Lily isn’t like that. How do you think she’d feel if I told her about this? She’d be humiliated!”*

*“So don’t tell her. I sure as hell won’t. Really, what’s the problem? No harm done.”*

*“The problem is...”* But then Potter seemed to deflate, his scowl giving way to a reluctant smile. *“Oh, nevermind. Just promise you won’t do it again, okay?”*

*“You got it.”*

Making a sound of disgust in his throat, Severus started to withdraw. But then he hesitated — Black’s defenses were completely down now, and with that realization, he recalled the original purpose behind his invasion. The cat, yes... she seemed rather less important now that his thoughts were preoccupied with Lily, but that didn’t change the fact that there was something going on with the creature, nor that it was in his interest to figure out what exactly that was.

As quick as lightning, he began shuffling through more recent memories, bored out of his mind as he observed the various minutiae of Black’s current existence. Not much to see beyond interactions with the other Order members interspersed with pathetic bouts of moping around, though Sirius seemed to do a lot more reading than he would’ve expected. Interesting... especially since at least a couple of the books he glimpsed were tomes of Dark Magic.

Even more curious was that on most of these occasions, the cat was right there beside him. Not acting as an ordinary feline would, begging for a scratch behind the ears, perhaps, or sleeping in his lap. She could often be seen looking over his shoulder, like she was reading the words along with him. And more than that, Black would ask her questions, seeming as if he expected a response each time he did.

*“Which one? Snakes on the cover? I don’t see it.”* And on this occasion, the cat actually walked over to the bookshelf, standing on her hind legs as she touched her nose to the book he was looking for.

Just what the hell was going on? Not an Animagus, and yet clearly human in some way. Severus had never heard of such a thing, even in all of his own vast reading.

Intrigued now, he flipped through the memories even faster, feeling as if he’d been inside Black’s head for hours even though it could’ve only been a matter of seconds. And there he was, sitting in the armchair in his bedroom, thumbing through what looked like a journal — small, plain, with a faded gray cover that might’ve once been blue.

And as he watched in disbelief, Sirius lifted his head with a whisper of, *“My God, Lily. I think I’ve found something.”*

## 20. Defining Choices

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### Chapter 20: Defining Choices

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Lily watched in shock as Severus stumbled backward, slumping against the wall with his head clutched in his hands. She'd understood what was happening, having heard on numerous occasions that he was now a Legilimens and a powerful one at that. So powerful, it seemed that Sirius had been helpless under his command... at least until he'd abruptly shifted into his animal form.

*What happened? What did he see?*

*Nothing I can't talk my way out of,* Sirius spoke in her mind, though he sounded far from convinced.

*What the hell did you do to him?*

*To him?! Sirius in his dog form actually growled at her. What about what he did to me?*

*Oh, right. Like you weren't doing everything you could to provoke him. And come to that, what is this perversion that I don't know about? What exactly...?*

Her thoughts trailed off as Severus pushed himself away from the wall, his face ashen. When he finally managed to speak, his voice trembled, so far removed from his usual smooth tones that she was genuinely frightened for him. "What," he said slowly, as if finding it an enormous challenge to formulate each word, "does *Lily* have to do with this?"

If it had been possible for a dog to shrug, she was sure Sirius would've done just that. Instead, he didn't react at all, only stared up at Severus like he was waiting for the latter to throw him a bone.

*He knows, Sirius. He knows! Switch back and tell him the rest, please! If anyone can help us figure out the rest of the spell, he can. You know he can!*

*No way, Lils. First of all, he didn't see enough to "know" anything. And second...*

*Goddammit, Sirius, I've had enough of this! TELL HIM.*

"Switch back," Severus said, echoing her words in low, menacing tones. "Now."

Sirius the dog shook his head.

"I'm giving you five seconds. Force my hand, and you'll regret it."

*Sirius, just do what he says. Please.*

*And let him think he has all the power? I don't think so, Lily.*

She crept closer to Severus, who glanced down at her with an unreadable expression. “Dark Magic,” he said, his voice a little more steady now. “A cat that seems... uncommonly intelligent. Invoking the name of a woman who’s been dead for fourteen years. Named the cat after her, did you? Or is it something else? Time’s up, Black. I want an explanation.”

Inside Lily’s head, Sirius laughed. *He can’t do a damn thing and he knows it — it takes at least two to cast that spell. What’s he going to do?*

*Underestimate him and you’re a fool, Sirius. Just switch back and tell him the truth.*

*No.*

Severus crossed the room in graceful strides, coming to a standstill directly in front of the dog. His dark eyes glittered in the lamplight, long, slender fingers clutching his wand like a lifeline as he whispered the spell. The flash of blue light that erupted from the tip was almost blinding this time, the product of a lethal concoction of immense power and sheer determination. Sirius cried out, a strange, guttural sound that was half human and half canine as his body twisted and reshaped into a different form. And when the light flickered out, there he was — trembling and speechless, but very much himself. He lunged for his wand, with Severus making no move to stop him.

“If you insist on a duel, I’ll be happy to oblige you,” Severus said instead, his own wand still raised. “But in your case, it seems like a lot of unpleasantness to endure simply for the sake of avoiding a few questions... questions I’ll have answers to sooner or later, regardless of what you choose to do just now.”

The rage emanating from Sirius was palpable. Lily could feel it poisoning the atmosphere around them, and for the first time, she was truly terrified. If it came to blows, the results could be devastating. Severus, she knew, was the more powerful of the two — he’d already proven that. But he was also more likely to restrain himself, while there was no telling what Sirius might do in a moment of fury. More than that, it wasn’t exactly comforting to remember that Sirius had already tried to get Severus killed on at least one occasion.

*Please, Sirius. Please don’t make this any worse than it has to be. For my sake, I’m begging you.*

His voice was an ugly snarl inside her head. *It’s mainly for your sake that I’d like to give the greasy bastard what he deserves. Yours, James, Harry’s...*

*He’s never done anything to hurt us, Sirius. Especially me.*

*HE’S A FUCKING DEATH EATER!*

*No. He’s not. Whatever he’s done in the past, he’s not like the rest of them. He never has been. Please, if you can’t trust him, then at least trust me. Let this go and tell him the truth.*

Severus was still waiting for a response, muscles tense and ready, mouth fixed in a grim line. Sirius glanced at him, then thought back at her, *Fine. All right, I won’t start throwing hexes. But I’m not telling him the truth either.*

*But he could help! You know he could!*

*We don’t need help, Lily, especially from the likes of him. If you’re still determined not to tell the others, I’ll figure it out myself. Just like I told you I would.*



“Well?” Severus said, startling them both. “Either we start dueling or you start talking. Your choice, but I’m not going to stand here all day. Unlike you, I have better things to do with my time. Fighting a war, for example, or preparing for another year of gainful employment.”

Lily winced as Sirius took a step forward, his face mottled with outrage. *That’s what this is all about*, she realized, projecting her thoughts at him without consciously realizing she was doing so. *Me, the spell... this is about you, Sirius. You’re trying to prove yourself, to play the hero. And you can’t stand the thought of Severus taking that away from you.*

*Enough, Lily*, he thought back at her, surprising her with his vehemence. *Don’t you dare put this on me, when he... nevermind. Look, I’m sorry. You want me to tell him? Fine. Then that’s what I’ll do.*

He lowered his wand, meeting Severus stare for stare as he said, “I didn’t name the cat after Lily. She IS Lily. What do you think of that?”

By the time Lily’s eyes had recovered from the blinding flash of crimson light, Sirius was moaning softly, crumpled on the floor in a heap. The only indication that Severus had been there at all was the slamming of the door, ricocheting through the house and leaving a cacophony of hatred in its wake.

*“Blood traitors! Mudbloods! Mutants and freaks, come to desecrate...”*

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Severus rarely drank these days. Doing so was hardly a good idea, since the Dark Lord could summon him at any moment and it would be crucial to be in full possession of his mental faculties if that happened. On the other hand, being back at school gave him a safety net — he was summoned much less often now, and if necessary, could concoct a reasonable excuse as to why he’d been delayed a few hours. That would give him plenty of time to sober up.

As if in support of this conclusion, some generous person had left a bottle of Ogden’s in the staff room. Having laid claim to it without hesitation, Severus had fled to his private quarters where he now held it clutched tightly in one hand, lifting it to his lips every so often while he stared moodily into the fire.

Despite his efforts, he couldn’t stop thinking about the confrontation with Black. She IS Lily? What kind of fucked up nonsense was that? No doubt it had been an attempt to wound him, which shamefully, had worked just a little too well. But taken with everything else... the peculiar behavior of the cat, to start with, Severus didn’t know what to think. Far too many questions...

It couldn’t be true. No, that was madness. Lily was dead. He’d held her lifeless body in his arms, had suffered the loss of her every day, every hour, every minute throughout all the years that had followed. And while it was true that magic made many things possible, there was no surviving the Killing Curse.

*The Potter boy managed it*, whispered an insidious voice buried deep in his consciousness. *Didn’t Lily play a part in that?*

Severus gulped down another swallow of firewhiskey, struggling to push the thought away. Having dwelled on memories of that awful night countless times, he'd long since learned the precise nature of the suffering they caused. Fury, remorse, helplessness, despair, followed by a queer, empty sensation that had never left him since. Lily's death had torn his heart to pieces. There was no denying that. But the pain he felt at the moment was something new, since he'd never considered even the slightest possibility that she'd survived.

He was insane to do so now. At least, that was what he kept telling himself. But just to imagine... Lily. *Alive*. A chance to put things right, far beyond his meager struggle for redemption in watching over her son. Just to hear her voice again, the sound of her laughter... to beg her forgiveness one more time, only now, to hold up the last fourteen years of his life as proof of his convictions. And if that wasn't enough, would it matter? He'd do whatever it took to win back her trust. Perhaps in time, even her love? Lily had loved him once, even if that love hadn't been the same as his feelings for her. But now... what if...?

No. No, he couldn't do this to himself. Lily was *dead*. He'd seen that with his own eyes, had felt the awful stillness when he'd clutched her to his chest in that final embrace. She was gone, lost to him forever. And no matter what twisted prank Black was trying to pull, he couldn't let himself forget that. Otherwise, he might well lose his soul.

Mercifully, the alcohol soon began to take effect, forcing his body into a state of deep relaxation. Sedated from his pain if not free from it, he fell asleep right there in front of the fire.

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"Lils?"

*I'm still not talking to you.*

"Oh, come on," Sirius said, pausing to double check that the bedroom door was warded before settling himself in his favorite armchair. "Hell, I'm the one who got Stunned, aren't I? If anybody deserves the silent treatment, it's Snape, not me."

*Severus has already been getting the silent treatment from me. Twenty years of it. I asked you to help me change that. I begged you...*

"And I told him! Just like you asked. What did that get me, hmmm?"

Lily glared down at him from her perch on the windowsill. *Don't give me that. You knew exactly what you were doing, knew he'd never believe you if you just blurted it out like that.*

"So it's my fault he can't control his temper?"

*After doing everything in your power to provoke him? Yes, I'd say it is.*

"Oh, and I suppose there was *nothing* wrong with the greasy git plundering through my head without my consent," Sirius replied, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

*If you'd just answered his questions, he would never have done that. You're the one who made it far more difficult than it had to be.*

"Why are you making excuses for him?"

*I'm not! But he knew you were hiding something... don't you think he had an obligation to find out what was going on? The entire Order relies on this house as a sanctuary. If he thought your behavior was suspicious, which it was, he must've been concerned. A lot of lives could have been at stake.*

"So now I'm a traitor. Thanks, Lils."

*Oh, stop it. You know that's not what I meant. And don't act like the injured party here either. You don't trust him any more than he trusts you. If the situation had been reversed, you would've done whatever it took to find out what he was up to.*

Sirius hesitated, giving her an irritated look. "That's different."

*How?*

"Well, to start with, I was never a Death Eater. No, don't start defending him again. I don't think I can take another round of 'Snivellus the Saint'. All I was trying to say is that it's over now. Can't we just forget about it?"

*No. First of all, I'd still like him to know the truth.*

"What makes you think he'd listen? Anyway, not much I can do about it now that he's back at Hogwarts, even if I wanted to. I doubt we'll be seeing much of him until next summer, thank Merlin."

*We'll get another chance. Sooner or later, I know we will. In the meantime, we have another problem.*

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Why am I not surprised? All right, tell me what it is."

*I want to know what he saw. Why he reacted the way he did, calling you a pervert and such.*

"Nothing important."

*Bullshit.*

"Lils, I really don't want to get into this. It was a long time ago, okay?"

*Tell me.*

"Snape *completely* overreacted. You know how he gets... turns everything into a melodrama, especially if it has anything to do with you."

*If it was no big deal to begin with, then why not tell me and be done with it?*

She had him there. Shifting uncomfortably in his chair, he avoided her eyes as he said, "All right. I might've seen you with James. When you were... you know. It was nothing."

*When we were fooling around? She frowned. Well, that's hardly a secret. We were always making out in front of you. Guess it went a little far sometimes, but you know — we were teenagers. I can see where Severus might've gotten the wrong impression though. He always seemed like he'd be much more private about that sort of thing.*

"I saw you shagging," Sirius blurted out, then looked as if he wanted to slap himself.

*You what?! How?*

"I might've... taken a peek here and there. Like I said, it was no big deal."

*You spied on us?! Where? When? Bloody hell, and Severus saw that? Saw me and James... oh god. No wonder he was upset!*

At the mention of his nemesis, the guilt in Sirius's expression faded, replaced by a scowl. "Served him right. He had no business getting into my head like that. Besides, it could hardly have come as a shock. He knew damn well that..."

*Knowing it and seeing it are two different things! You... I can't believe you have the audacity to sit there complaining about your privacy being invaded! So you... James...* Her stream of consciousness spiraled off in a hundred directions, conflicting emotions taking precedence over logical thought.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" Sirius held his hands out in surrender. "I'm not saying it was right. But that was twenty years ago. You know what I was like back then — when did I ever stop to think about what I was doing before I did it?"

*You say that like you've changed. You haven't, Sirius. You're just as impulsive, every bit as selfish as you ever were. What you did to him...*

"I was defending myself!"

*No, you weren't. You were trying to hurt him. Meanwhile, you never even considered that you might be hurting me in the process.*

"All right. So I was angry. I did a stupid thing. I've already apologized for it, Lily. What else do you want me to do?"

*I'm not the only one who deserves an apology.*

"What? You mean Sniv-Snape?" He stared at her as if she'd just sprouted a second head. "I'll apologize to him when he..."

*Enough, Sirius! I don't want to hear it anymore! Don't you see what you're doing? This is never going to stop. Never! Not unless you swallow your stupid pride and act like a grown man for once in your life!*

Sirius was furious now, nearly shouting as he said, "A grown man? Might I remind you that during the time I was supposed to be *growing up*, I was locked up in bloody Azkaban? No contact with the outside world, no chance to deal with..."

*You think you're the only one? Look at how I've spent the past fourteen years!*

"Okay, fair enough. But that doesn't change the fact that Snape has a hell of a lot more to apologize for than I do. Hell, existing in the first place would be a good place to start."

And as Sirius chuckled at himself, Lily realized she'd reached an impasse. She still cared for him deeply, but while he was much the same as he'd been twenty years ago, she was not. Once before, she'd stood at a crossroads like this, having come to the realization that she had to choose one side or the other. It wasn't possible to have both... not without ripping herself apart in the process.

Back in her fifth year at Hogwarts, she'd gone with the easy option. She'd left Severus behind for the sake of friendships that were far less complex, loyalties she never had to justify. She'd chosen comfort over uncertainty, casual affection over raw, complicated need. It had been easy to convince herself that it had been the right choice, the *only* choice. But in the end, the depth of that commitment had gone both ways. James and his friends would've been fine without her. Severus, on the other hand? How different might his life have been if she'd stood by him, refusing to give up no matter the cost?

That was water under the bridge now, of course. And yet she couldn't help thinking about all the years since, how much he'd suffered over the loss of her, all the things he'd done to make amends for his mistakes. Even now, when she'd supposedly been dead for fourteen years, what he was attempting to do in her memory was the most important thing in his life.

In truth, that was what she'd been running from all those years ago. Even back then, she'd felt it in her bones, an indefinable connection between them. It had been terrifying, the knowledge that their fates were intertwined... that if he descended into darkness, he'd take her right along with him whether he intended to do so or not.

But that was it, wasn't it? There'd *never* been any escape, no chance that her actions wouldn't have a direct effect on him, and that his wouldn't do the same in return. One could hardly exist without the other, which was why he wandered through his current reality like a shadow, all his purpose bent on fulfilling his vow. In the end, he *couldn't* let go of her... any more than she could let go of him.

No, there was no getting away from the bond they shared, though she was no longer frightened by that realization. On the contrary, she found solace there, a feeling of security she hadn't experienced since her life had been ripped apart more than a decade before. She needed to be with him. No reason, no explanation... at least, none that Sirius would understand.

"Lily?" he said, and it was only then that she realized she'd leapt from the windowsill and was heading toward the door. She turned around, giving him a long look before projecting her intentions.

*I'm sorry, Sirius. I'm going back to Hogwarts.*

"Look, I'll apologize if it's that important to you. Not for all of it, but at least..."

*This isn't about that,* she thought at him. *Not anymore. I just have to go.*

He stared back at her, obviously distressed. "But..."

*Please, try not to do anything reckless, hmm?*

"But the research. The spell..."

*Don't worry. I'll find another way.*

And somehow, she knew she would, just as she understood why it had taken her so long to come to this point. Fear had held her back from so many things, always choosing what was familiar and comforting over the unknown. She couldn't have moved forward without accepting that particular weakness, without finding the determination to set it aside and choose a different path.

It was Severus she saw on that path, waiting with his hand outstretched... not just as a means of escape, there to shelter and protect her as she knew he'd do. He needed her as much as she needed him, because in the end, they were destined to fly or fall together. Such was the way it had always been, even if she'd been too blind to see it until now.

Well, her eyes were finally open... wide open and gazing toward the north. Full of hope. Full of purpose. Full of the knowledge that at long last, she'd figured out exactly what she needed to do.

"Lily..."

*I'm sorry, Sirius. There's nothing left to say.*

## 21. On the Precipice

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### Chapter 21: On the Precipice

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Lily had to wait several months for Severus to make an appearance at Grimmauld Place. She'd wanted to fly to Hogwarts without delay, but was unwilling to leave the little calico cat behind, being as it was the source of his suspicions. No need to make the mystery more complicated than it already was... especially now, when she was more desperate than ever to help him solve it.

If only Sirius would agree to give him the journal they'd found. It was ancient, missing quite a few pages while others were smudged beyond comprehension. But from what they'd been able to piece together, Lily knew they had the answer. *Ligatis Animalia* was the name of the spell... a protective charm rather than Dark Magic. She couldn't imagine why Voldemort would have used such a thing on her, but it was difficult to dwell on that when she was more concerned with how it could be reversed.

That was the problem, since the most damaged part of the book had contained the instructions for the counterspell. Granted, it was comforting to know there *was* a solution. But nobody short of the most gifted witch or wizard could hope to figure out what that solution might be with such a small amount of information to go on. Sirius was talented in his own ways, of course, but magic of life and death... magic of the soul? It wasn't as if he had any experience with that sort of thing.

Besides, they were barely speaking now. He spent most of his time moping around or sniping at Kreacher, preferring to stay shut up in his bedroom unless the other Order members were around. In truth, it was getting to be terribly lonely around Grimmauld Place. She hadn't realized how comforting it had been to have someone to talk to after so many years of isolation, even if they'd argued more often than not.

Indeed, she was restless these days, especially since she'd overheard enough to know that Harry was having a difficult year at Hogwarts. He had a new teacher who'd been appointed by the Ministry, a beast of a woman who was apparently doing everything in her power to make his life miserable. That on its own was bad enough, but the continued efforts by the Ministry to discredit him, to pretend he'd made the whole thing up about Voldemort's return? That had her crawling the walls with anxiety. What were they thinking? Leaving everyone in ignorance, disregarding any need to prepare for what could only be an encroaching war?

She had to give Sirius credit for one thing, which was the way he treated Harry. He was a wonderful godfather, doing everything in his power to comfort her son. *James's* son, of course, which she couldn't pretend wasn't a major factor in why he looked after Harry as well as he did. But she couldn't help feeling a great deal of gratitude toward anyone who tried to be there for Harry... especially at the moment, when she didn't even have the luxury of looking after him from a distance.

That was another reason she was anxious to return to Hogwarts... hardly able to stand it as the days dragged on, bored out of her mind and bristling with impatience. While she didn't approve of the way Sirius handled his own restlessness, particularly the heavy drinking and verbally abusing the house-elf, she could certainly understand his frustrations.

And then at long last, the house was filled with life again. Unfortunately, the circumstances were less than ideal, particularly where Harry was concerned. He'd had a dream — or a vision, to be more accurate — of a massive snake attacking Arthur Weasley. Thankfully, Arthur had survived, but it seemed there was some sort of connection between Harry and Voldemort, and no one understood how or why it existed. Perhaps Dumbledore had a theory or two, but as usual, he put everyone off with cryptic remarks and didn't trouble himself to answer any direct questions.

Of course, Lily had lost most of her faith in her former hero years ago, so this hardly came as a surprise. She'd been able to observe too many things that went on behind closed doors, too many instances of Dumbledore allowing Harry to put himself in danger, sometimes even encouraging him in his more reckless exploits. And now he was withholding more and more information from her son, seeming oblivious to the negative impact it was having on Harry. Was he blind? Harry was already seething with frustration. He needed answers, and soon, or there was no telling what he might do.

Sometimes she wondered if this was why Harry and Sirius got on so well. Both had trouble controlling their tempers, as well as a tendency to act on impulse rather than thinking things through. Of course, Harry was a teenager, so perhaps that was only to be expected to some degree... especially since he was dealing with an enormous amount of pressure. But there were times she felt that Sirius encouraged the more reckless parts of Harry's personality, just as Dumbledore did. It was as if they saw him as another version of James, rather than a child in need of protection.

She'd tried to speak with Sirius about it, but even after all these years, James was a touchy subject. And so she tried to find comfort in the fact that Harry was surrounded by others who were more moderate in their guidance. The Weasleys, for example, especially Molly and Arthur. Hermione, who was a brilliant girl and had saved him from disaster on numerous occasions. There was Minerva, of course... and while she was aware that Harry wasn't exactly fond of him, she could at least be assured that Severus would do everything in his power to prevent him from doing anything foolish.

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When Christmas arrived, the atmosphere around Grimmauld Place was much more cheerful, which had to be a relief for them all. Even Sirius was in a good mood, abandoning his drinking habit for the time being and going out of his way to play the gracious host. Lily kept hoping Severus would make an appearance... not to take part in the social gathering, because of course, she knew him better than that. But perhaps he'd stop by to deal with Order business now that he was off on holiday as well?

As it was, she didn't see him until the day before Harry and his friends were expected to return to school. He strode into the front hall, as dignified and imposing as ever, murmuring to Molly that he needed to speak privately with Harry. This piqued Lily's interest, of course. She followed him into the kitchen, jumping into his lap when he settled himself at the table.



“You again,” he said softly, crooking a long finger under her chin and giving it a little scratch. “What’s your secret, hmm?”

So he hadn’t figured it out. Well, that was no surprise.

Just then, Sirius entered the room, dropping into the chair across from Severus and fixing him with a resentful glare. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’ve been sent to speak with Potter.”

“About what?”

Severus flicked his hair out of his eyes, giving Sirius an exasperated look. “That’s none of your affair.”

“Now see here...”

*Must you always do this?* Lily thought in frustration. *This is exactly what I was talking about. You’re provoking him! Just leave him alone and let him talk to Harry.*

Sirius ignored her, his attention fixed on Severus. “Harry is my godson. If it pertains to him, you can be assured that it is my business. And I don’t trust you.”

“Indeed?” Severus said, his voice dropping to a low, silky drawl. “You *do* realize that I’ve been teaching Mr. Potter for more than four years now. Has it ever occurred to you that if I had any intention of harming the boy, I’ve had no shortage of opportunities to do so?”

“Maybe you haven’t tried anything yet, but that doesn’t mean you won’t.”

“And if I did? I can’t see how you’d be able to stop me. Unless you think I’d be stupid enough to try something right here under the Order’s nose...”

Sirius started to say something, then abruptly shut his mouth as Harry entered the kitchen. Lily could sense her son’s discomfort, which was hardly a surprise since the hostility in the room was almost palpable. Hoping for a little more civility, at least for his sake, she was soon disappointed.

For Severus’s part, he tried to focus on the message he’d been sent to deliver. Unfortunately, Sirius made that task as difficult as possible, refusing to leave and allow him to speak with Harry in private. Perhaps Severus was more snarky than was strictly necessary, but compared with Sirius, who was yelling open threats...

“How touching. But surely you have noticed that Potter is very like his father?”

“Yes, I have,” Sirius said, his voice filled with pride.

Severus sneered.

Lily, who’d taken up a new vantage point on the kitchen counter, cringed. She had a feeling she knew what was coming, and it wasn’t going to end well. This was her one point of contention with Severus, which she had every intention of dealing with if she could ever be restored to her former self. She wasn’t so blind that she thought her son was an innocent victim — she’d seen him provoke Severus on more than one occasion. But Severus was supposed to be the adult, and he really needed to...

“Well then, you’ll know he’s so arrogant that criticism simply bounces off him.”

In a flash, Sirius whipped out his wand and lunged at Severus, who’d pulled out his own in response. Meanwhile, Harry was begging Sirius to stop, for all the good it did. Vaguely, she wondered whether it was Harry that Sirius was trying to defend, or if he’d been driven to fury by the insult to James. Did he even know how to separate the two? In truth, Harry was less like his father than anyone who’d known James seemed to realize. Why couldn’t they just let him be himself?

“I’ve warned you, Snivellus,” Sirius snarled. “I don’t care if Dumbledore thinks you’ve reformed. I know better.”

*STOP IT!* she thought at him as forcefully as she could manage. Useless. He was oblivious to Harry’s distress... why should he care anything about hers?

The taunting grew worse until Sirius lifted his wand again, disregarding Harry’s frantic attempts to stop him. But just as it seemed the scene could only end in disaster, the entire Weasley family entered the kitchen, accompanied by Hermione.

Just like that, the tension melted away. Severus tucked his wand back into his robes and headed for the door, only turning back to remind Harry of his Occlumency lessons on Monday evening. And then she saw her chance. Sirius was preoccupied, busy explaining himself to Molly and Arthur, so she managed to slip through the door as it closed behind Severus.

She followed him into the foyer, nearly tripping him as she wove between his legs.

He paused, staring down at her with an inscrutable expression. “Why not?” he muttered under his breath, scooping her up and tucking her inside his robes. “Whatever you are, I can’t imagine you deserve to be left here with the likes of him.”

If Lily had had the ability to laugh, she would’ve been chuckling all the way to Hogwarts.

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As expected, Severus’s first Occlumency lesson with Potter was an exercise in futility. Fucking Dumbledore. Why did he never listen? Not only did the boy lack the discipline to master such a skill, but even if he was capable of learning to some degree, he wouldn’t get far without trusting his instructor.

Severus wasn’t angry about the extra demand on his schedule, would’ve considered it a worthwhile sacrifice if he’d felt they were doing something useful. But the boy had too much pent up anger, too much resentment, much of which was directed at Severus himself. They were getting nowhere, nor were they likely to in the foreseeable future.

Really, what was the point?

His only consolation was that he’d been able to pass along a few of Dumbledore’s theories, having never agreed with the practice of keeping Potter in the dark. The boy might be an arrogant little shit, but he had a right to know as much as possible about matters that directly involved him.

Grumbling to himself, Severus slipped from his office into his private quarters, rolling his eyes at the cat who was sprawled out across his pillows.

“Comfortable?” he asked dryly, nearly smiling as she responded with a luxurious stretch. “Well, I’m afraid you’re going to have to move. I’m exhausted.”

Obligingly, she shifted to one side, leaving him plenty of room to join her.

Such a peculiar thing — Severus had survived as long as he had by never letting his guard down, by approaching every situation with the utmost caution. And now here he was, making himself freely accessible to this... he didn’t even know how to describe her. Feline? Human? A little of both? She’d borne witness to more of his private doings than anyone for as long as he could recall, and yet, he didn’t feel the least bit threatened by her presence. Instinct told him that she could be trusted, that there was no need to worry about the consequences even if he chose to reveal his darkest secrets. He would never do that, of course, but just feeling that the option was there was a foreign concept.

Foreign, perhaps, but not unpleasant.

Too tired to bother with a proper nightshirt, he stripped off his robes and frock coat, unbuttoning his shirt and shrugging it off before crawling into bed in just his trousers. The cat was staring at him again, which should’ve been creepy, really, but he couldn’t help feeling strangely flattered.

He was going mad. That was it. Losing his mind out of sheer loneliness. Pathetic, the feeling of contentment that washed over him when the cat snuggled close, purring softly. And yet it seemed natural somehow, familiar, a sort of connectedness that he’d only ever felt with...

“Lily.”

He said it out loud without any intention of doing so, and the cat lifted her head, staring at him intently with her big green eyes. Of course they’d have to be green, wouldn’t they?

“That’s your name, isn’t it?” he said softly. “At least, that’s what he called you.”

It couldn’t be Lily. Not in truth. Severus knew that, and yet, it was as if the creature had taken on at least some of the characteristics of her namesake. Was Black responsible for that? Perhaps he’d stumbled across some obscure spell... a milder variation of the enchantment placed on portraits so they might serve as an echo of their late inhabitants. But why would he have chosen Lily? Why not James Potter, who’d clearly meant a great deal more to him?

And then it was obvious... so blatantly clear that Severus cursed himself for an idiot. Of course Black had chosen Lily if revenge had been his motivation. A subtle strike rather than a direct assault, using what he knew to be Severus’s greatest vulnerability? Naturally, that begged the question as to what reaction he’d been hoping for. Had he honestly thought his nemesis would be traumatized because a fucking cat vaguely reminded him of his lost love?

Chuckling to himself, Severus gave the cat a scratch behind the ears, certain now that he’d solved the mystery.

Lily felt trapped.

Oh, she'd been much happier here at Hogwarts with Severus these past few months. She loved sleeping beside him, was thrilled at the way he'd started talking to her on a regular basis, often as if he didn't consciously realize he was doing so. He was being surprisingly... *sweet*, really, which was a side of him she hadn't seen since their falling out all those years ago. He brought her little treats from his meals in the Great Hall, was generous with his affections, and seemed to genuinely enjoy having her around.

And yet that was why she'd grown so restless. She wanted to interact with him as herself, knowing that at least part of the reason he'd accepted her so readily in the form of a furry companion must've been due to loneliness. Severus might live in a castle surrounded by hundreds of people, but in truth, he led a very solitary existence. She wanted to change that, far beyond her present capabilities, especially now that she'd realized how much she cared about him.

But how? She'd come no closer to revealing the truth. He knew there was something *different* about her, which was progress of a sort. But he also believed she was the product of a prank Sirius had decided to play on him, which made the burden of proof even more difficult than before. She'd thought again about spelling out a message, perhaps a memory only the two of them would know. But even that... how was he to know she hadn't shared that information with Sirius at some point after their falling out?

What could she say that would serve as irrefutable proof? At this point, Severus would accept nothing less.

The best idea she could come up with was to find some way to get the journal to him. She couldn't hope Sirius would be any help in that department, but if she could lead Severus to the book somehow or even switch to another animal and retrieve it herself, he'd put two and two together. She had no doubt about that.

That plan would have to wait until the next time he put in an appearance at Grimmauld Place, unfortunately, since she didn't have the power to get through the wards in her current form. She could probably manage it as an owl, but that would necessitate traveling hundreds of miles with the journal. Considering how carefully the Ministry was watching Owl Post these days, she couldn't bring herself to take that risk. That journal might be her only chance of ever lifting the spell, and if it was confiscated...

No. Besides, they were well into spring now. The school year would be over in a matter of weeks. Severus would resume his duties as a spy for the Order, giving her plenty of opportunities to accompany him to Headquarters. Just a little longer now and he'd know the truth, even if it took him a while to figure out how to lift the spell itself.

It was frightening, really, the thought of being *human* again. How would Severus react? What about Harry? How would he cope with meeting the mother who'd supposedly orphaned him as a baby? What about Vernon and Petunia? What would she say to them, having waited fourteen years to give them a piece of her mind? All the friends she'd once known, her teachers, the Wizarding world at large... how would they feel about her now?

Well, she knew one thing for sure. Come what may, at least she'd no longer be alone.

“Do you ever leave these rooms?” Severus smirked at the cat, who was giving him a sullen look. “Well, I can hardly blame you. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t want to be out there either.”

Wasn’t that the truth? He’d come to expect a certain amount of chaos each year, but with that repulsive Umbridge breathing down everyone’s neck every second of the day, the atmosphere around Hogwarts was downright miserable. Worse, his own Slytherins were helping the bitch carry out her reign of terror, and there was little he could do to stop them without implicating himself in the process.

To top it off, Dumbledore had been forced to flee the premises. Severus refused to use the word “sacked”, being as he could hardly see where those who had done the sacking had had the authority to do so. And after what had happened to Minerva the day before...

“I need a nap,” he grumbled, eying his bed with a great deal of longing. He rarely allowed himself such luxuries in the middle of the afternoon, even when things were relatively calm around Hogwarts. But his classes were concluded for the day, and at any rate, what else could he do? Grade the mountain of essays that were waiting for him? Stalk the halls and watch in helpless frustration as Umbridge and her “Inquisitorial Squad” made everyone’s lives a living hell?

“Fuck it.” Pulling off his boots, he collapsed on the bed with a groan that was part pleasure, part pain. Just thirty minutes... that was all he needed. His eyes were so heavy that he could no longer keep them open. Even the constant anxieties that battered his mind seemed to melt away, muffled into silence by sheer exhaustion.

Unfortunately, it was only the briefest respite — it could’ve been no more than five minutes before he was up again, startled by a sharp rap on the door.

“Professor Snape? Are you in there?”

He cursed under his breath, heaving himself out of bed. “Yes, Draco,” he called back. “One moment.”

When he opened the door, it was with the sinking feeling that he wouldn’t be getting much sleep in the foreseeable future. Draco was waiting just outside, his expression positively dripping with malicious glee as he said, “The Headmistress wishes to see you, sir. She requests that you bring another bottle of Veritaserum.”

“Oh?” said Severus. “And who are we interrogating this time?”

It was pointless to ask, really, being as Draco looked like he was about to piss himself with excitement. But Severus’s stomach still lurched as the boy uttered a single word, lingering over each syllable like a caress.

“Potter.”

## 22. Smoke Signals

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### Chapter 22: Smoke Signals

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When Severus entered the office, at least a dozen students were locked in combat, doing their utmost to tear each other to shreds. Meanwhile, the so-called headmistress looked on with a placid smile, doing nothing to stop the potential bloodbath. His first instinct was to start hurling detentions in every direction... no, that wasn't true. He'd much rather have thrown a nasty hex at the bitch who was responsible for such a shameful scene in the first place.

"You wanted to see me, Headmistress?" The words tasted like bile in his mouth, though they sounded respectful enough.

"Ah, Professor Snape. Yes, I would like another bottle of Veritaserum. As quick as you can, please."

He could've easily grabbed a bottle of the fake stuff on his way up. It had worked well enough before. But if he didn't have the luxury of making his real feelings known, why not allow himself the satisfaction of denying her wishes? It was, after all, his only way of rebelling without exposing himself in the process.

Savoring her outraged expression, he wasted no time in informing her that he wouldn't be able to produce another batch for at least a month.

Draco had already told him that Potter had broken into the office to access the Floo Network. Interesting. On one hand, stupid, reckless behavior wasn't exactly out of character for the boy. On the other, why would he have taken such an enormous risk simply to have a casual chat with Black? Why now, when he'd be back at Grimmauld Place in a matter of days?

Meeting Potter's eyes, Severus stared at him with as much intensity as he could get away with without arousing suspicion. Naturally, the open use of Legilimency was out of the question, but sometimes it was possible to connect with another's mind without needing to verbalize the spell. And Potter was trying... Severus caught brief flashes of some unknown location, a blurry specter of a man that could've been Black, though he couldn't make out his features. He felt a twinge of regret then, knowing this method of communication would've been much more effective if he hadn't abandoned his lessons with the boy.

"I wish to interrogate him!" Umbridge screeched, forcing him to break the tenuous connection.

Really, the woman was an idiot. What did she expect him to do... conjure a fresh supply of Veritaserum out of thin air? Apparently so. It was all he could do not to laugh as she puffed up like a toad, informing him he was on probation for being "deliberately unhelpful."

Meanwhile, the boy's desperation was palpable, but what could he do? Alert the Order that something was amiss, perhaps, but what would be the point if he had no idea what that "something" was?

And then just as he turned to leave, Potter cried out, "He's got Padfoot! He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden!"

It took only a second for the pieces to click into place, leading to any number of alarming questions. What the hell was the Dark Lord doing with Black? Holding him hostage in the hope of luring Potter to his location? What was his business at the Department of Mysteries? How, precisely, had Black been captured when he wasn't supposed to leave Grimmauld Place? Had he left of his own volition, or did this mean that Headquarters had been breached?

"Padfoot? What is Padfoot? Where what is hidden? What does he mean, Snape?"

Severus composed himself as he turned around, keeping his expression blank while hoping Potter would be interpret his barely perceptible nod as indication that he'd understood and would act accordingly. Then again, Gryffindors weren't known for their grasp of subtle nuance, were they?

"I have no idea," he said after a moment, doing his utmost to sound completely disinterested. Not easy when the entire war might hinge on whatever it was that the boy had seen, but he managed it somehow, tossing out a couple of snarky remarks just for the sake of it as he swept out of the room.

Soon enough, he was back in his private quarters, reaching in his robes to retrieve the necessary talisman. All the Order members had something similar — a bangle, a pendant, a shining broach. Ordinary jewelry to the naked eye, far less suspicious than carrying mirrors around. Severus's particular trinket was an antique ring, tarnished silver sculpted into twisting bands of ivy with a large hematite at the center. He slipped it on his finger, immediately calling for Black.

Perched on the bed as usual, the cat watched him curiously.

For a minute, Severus was sure nothing would happen. Maybe the Dark Lord had Black and he couldn't respond? Could he already be dead? He wouldn't be much help in luring Potter away from Hogwarts in such a condition, but Voldemort wasn't exactly stable these days either. Severus wouldn't have been surprised to discover that he'd struck Black down in a fleeting moment of rage.

But then the ring grew warm, and soon enough, he saw the man in question.

"Yeah? What do you want, Snape?"

"To ascertain your whereabouts."

"Where the hell do you think I am? And why do you care?"

Severus caught a glimpse of peeling wallpaper in the background, recognizing it from the downstairs sitting room at Grimmauld. Breathing a sigh of relief, he said, "Good. Stay there. Do not leave under any circumstances, understand?"

Black narrowed his eyes. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

“Not particularly... and I don’t have time to explain, at any rate. Unlike you, I don’t...” But for once, he swallowed the insult. There were more important things to worry about just now. ‘Stay there,’ he repeated, “and try not to do anything stupid.”

“But...”

He broke the connection, hurrying back out into the halls. His next order of business was to secure Potter’s whereabouts, then to pass along the information that Black was safe and well. The last thing they needed was for the boy to go charging off on some vigilante rescue mission, especially since there was no one to worry about rescuing in the first place.

There was no need to ask questions. All he had to do was keep his ears open as he prowled the corridors, and soon enough, he had all the information he needed. From there, he went straight to Draco, inquiring in casual tones as to what had transpired after he’d left Umbridge’s office.

“Wasn’t right for her to put you on probation,” Draco said, his expression sullen. “I’ll be speaking with my father about that, among other things.”

“Most assuredly. What else happened?”

“Potter and his friends took her out to the Forbidden Forest, sir.”

“Yes, yes,” Severus said, trying not to sound too impatient. “For what purpose?”

“They told her that they’d been helping Dumbledore develop some kind of weapon. We all wanted to have a look for ourselves, but...”

Severus frowned. “A weapon? Out in the Forbidden Forest?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And they have not returned?”

“No, sir.”

“Thank you, Draco. That will be all.”

It seemed as if every answered question only served to create two or three new ones. He knew very well that the business about the weapon was a lie — or at least, he thought he did. It was always possible that this was another pertinent detail that Dumbledore had failed to mention. Severus wouldn’t have put it past him.

But no, that couldn’t be it. For all his complaints about Potter and his friends, which were too numerous to count, he’d never call their loyalty under question. They’d take Dumbledore’s secrets to the grave rather than sell him out to the enemy.

Yes, it had to be a trick, no doubt something the Granger girl had come up with. Or at least, Severus hoped so, being as she was the only one out of the three with a shred of common sense.

He stalked the halls for another twenty minutes and still, they were nowhere to be found. At that point, he had no choice but contact the Order, suspecting that they’d had given the old toad the slip and could very well be halfway to the Ministry by now.



“Kingsley?” he called when he was back in his quarters. “Lupin?”

It was the werewolf who responded first, greeting him with one of those annoyingly pleasant smiles. “Severus! How are you? Is everything all right?”

“No,” he said shortly, “I don’t believe it is.”

He quickly explained the situation, relieved that most of the Order members were present.

“Yes, yes,” Lupin said. “Of course we’ll go. Without hesitation. What about you, Severus?”

“Tell Dumbledore I’ll be conducting a thorough search of the Forbidden Forest. If Potter is in fact still on the premises, you can be assured that I’ll find him.”

Lupin nodded. “Best of luck to you.”

“All right,” Moody announced. “Ready to go? No time to waste! Tonks, Kingsley, Remus? Black, you with us?”

“Not Black,” Severus said, rather more loudly than he’d intended.

“Now see here, Snape. Harry is my godson. If anyone’s going to his rescue, it’s going to be...”

“Someone needs to stay behind so we can let Dumbledore know what’s happening,” Severus told him, feeling like he was speaking to a small, rather dimwitted child. “Beyond that, you have a price on your head, and while I’m not particularly concerned over your safety, you run the risk of endangering the others. I should also point out that Potter had those visions for a reason. Until we know precisely what that reason is...”

“Don’t worry, Severus,” Tonks interrupted, her eyes bright with excitement. “We’ve got it. Sirius, you’ll stay here. The rest of you, let’s move out!”

He might’ve said something else, but the connection was broken, which was just as well. Perhaps in their haste, they’d manage to intercept Potter and his friends before they ever reached the Ministry.

Intending to get on with his own search, he’d just pulled on his coat when the Dark Mark started to burn. Wincing, he grasped his forearm, less troubled by the pain itself than the awareness of what it meant. There were different types of summons, of course. A stronger, more direct pain was a personal message, while a more subtle burning sensation was an indication that an ordinary meeting was about to take place. This pain, the strongest of all, was a call to action, infused with all the fury that the Dark Lord experienced when he was about to do battle. Fuck.

Well, there was hardly any point in searching the Forbidden Forest now, was there? Dropping into his armchair in front of the fire, Severus stared down at the ring on his finger. After a few minutes had passed, he muttered, “Black?”

There was no response... not that he’d expected one.

And so the war had begun.

It shouldn't have come as a shock. After all, Lily had known for a year that Voldemort was back. But it had all happened so fast, from the battle at the Department of Mysteries to Sirius's death, resulting in the rapidly shifting atmosphere around Hogwarts now that the truth was known. It was as if the world had changed overnight, and having lived through one war already, she knew that it would never be the same.

Severus assumed she spent most of her time in his quarters, which was technically true since it was the cat he was speaking to when he poked fun at her about it. But Lily herself found no shortage of opportunities to go anywhere she pleased. She'd been in the hospital wing when Harry had visited his friends, had watched over him constantly in the aftermath of such a huge loss. And of course, she'd learned a reasonable amount about what had transpired during the battle through various conversations she'd overheard.

Other than Harry's obvious distress and her own quiet grief for her fallen friend, what troubled her most was a dislike that had blossomed into fuming hatred. No, Harry had never gotten along with Severus, but to blame him for Sirius's death? She'd heard for herself how Severus had tried to warn him, could see no reason that the fault should rest with him. Perhaps it was simply that Harry needed *someone* to blame, but in this case, it could be dangerous. Severus's efforts to protect him had saved his life on numerous occasions... the more Harry distrusted him, the more he sealed himself off from a crucial source of protection.

Of course, there was nothing she could do under the circumstances. She couldn't encourage Harry to put his negative feelings aside, nor could she persuade Severus to go a little easier on him.

Fortunately, the school year was ending, which meant she could further her own plans. But would the Order still use Grimmauld Place as their headquarters now that Sirius was dead? She had to get to that journal, had to make sure Severus saw it and understood what it was. But as long as the wards were still in place, there was little she could do unless he happened to take her there.

She couldn't count on that. Not with any certainty. And that was why she came up with a new plan.

Now was not the time to spring such a huge shock on Professor McGonagall, who was still recovering from her hospitalization. But if Lily didn't find a way to reach Severus during the summer, that would be her first order of business in the following school year. She still felt uneasy about that option, being as McGonagall was far too close to Dumbledore for comfort. But if there was no other way, she'd do what she had to do.

Meanwhile, she intended to explore other possibilities over the holiday, while staying close to Severus. That was initially a cause for concern — what if he chose not to take her with him? It would be easy to stow away in another form — a beetle, a mouse, a spider. But to leave the calico cat behind? Severus had developed a strong affinity for her in that form. Surely that would be an important factor in getting him to recognize the truth.

In the end though, she had no reason to worry. He came into his quarters on the final day, reminding her of his younger, more awkward self as he set a basket down in the armchair.

“Well?” he said, raising an eyebrow at her. “Are you coming with me, or would you prefer to stay here with Filch all summer?”

She jumped into the basket without hesitation, eliciting a quiet chuckle.

“That’s what I thought.”

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The first post-Department of Mysteries meeting was brutal, far beyond Severus’s expectations. The Dark Lord was in a towering fury, screaming to the point of incomprehension while throwing curses in every direction. Severus himself caught a stray Cruciatus... just a brief one, thankfully, but enough to leave his nerve endings raw for the next few hours.

“Narcissa,” the Dark Lord snarled when he’d finally regained his composure. “Bring Draco forward.”

Clearly, she knew better than to hesitate, though the fear in her eyes suggested she was fighting the impulse to grab her son’s hand and run from the room. Instead, she laid a hand on Draco’s shoulder, urging him forward. He went willingly, wearing the oddest expression of excitement mingled with dread.

“So, Draco,” Voldemort hissed, his serpentine eyes filled with cold calculation. “Your father has disappointed all expectations, setting our cause back for months, if not years.”

“Yes, My Lord,” the boy responded, sounding sullen.

“Tell me: are you cast from his mold? Or are you made of stronger stuff?”

“I... I would not fail you, My Lord. Not as he did.”

For the first time that evening, Voldemort looked pleased. “That’s what I was hoping to hear, Draco. Then you are ready to pledge yourself to my service?”

“No!” Narcissa cried out, unable to help herself. She looked terrified, no doubt realizing she was treading on dangerous ground as she struggled to regain her composure. “Forgive me, My Lord. I only intended to say that Draco has only just turned 16. Surely he’s too young...”

“Silence!” the Dark Lord roared, his voice ricocheting off the walls of the cavernous drawing room. “We stand at the edge of a precipice, Narcissa, or need I remind you? Several of those I believed to be my most capable servants are now out of commission thanks to your bumbling husband. We do not have the luxury of turning away anyone who wishes to serve our cause.”

“Of course,” she replied, sounding defeated.

“What about you, Draco? Your mother seems to believe you’re not capable of proving yourself in my service. What do you say to that?”

Draco stood up straight, meeting the Dark Lord’s eyes without flinching. “With all due respect to my mother, My Lord, I believe she underestimates me.”

“I’m inclined to agree.”

None of the other Death Eaters witnessed the branding. Voldemort shuffled Narcissa and Draco off into a separate room, shutting the door firmly behind them. But they felt it as they always did, dozens of muffled hisses breathed out in perfect time with the ragged sob on the other side of the door. Draco wouldn't be chided for that, at least — the Dark Lord was always happy to be reminded that the branding was, in fact, an agonizing experience.

Unconsciously, Severus clutched his forearm, wincing in sympathy. His own pain was of a different sort, however, the kind that went far deeper than the searing of flesh. How many years had he spent hoping to prevent this? Would it have turned out differently if he'd been able to openly discourage his Slytherins from repeating his mistakes? How many more would follow in Draco's footsteps before it was over?

After a while, the trio emerged, each wearing radically different expressions. Narcissa seemed numb, broken, as if all the hope had been sucked out of her, while Draco looked as if he'd taken a Stunner to the chest, pale and shaking as he forced his lips into a wan smile. Only the Dark Lord himself was truly pleased about what had transpired in that room, his eyes glowing with triumph as he took a seat in the gilded armchair that had been prepared for him like a throne.

"Severus?"

"My Lord." He bowed low, as careful as ever to compose his features in a mask of bland indifference.

"I would have a word with you. In private. The rest of you can go."

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Lily had never accompanied Severus to a Death Eater meeting, though she'd seen him summoned at least a dozen times by now. Admittedly, she was curious as to what went on at these meetings and of course, she would've loved to know what Voldemort was planning next. But it would be a stupid, unnecessary risk — Voldemort himself had been the one who'd cast the spell on her. How could she know he wouldn't be able to sense her presence if she was in close proximity?

Rather than take that chance, she spent her time wandering around Spinner's End during Severus's absences, restlessly poking about. Strange.. aside from the bookshelves running floor to ceiling on the walls of his sitting room and a rather impressive potions lab installed in the basement, he'd done little to improve the place.

Perhaps he didn't see the need, being as he only lived here a couple months out of the year? That was the simple answer, though she had a feeling it was more than that. Something else to add to the growing list of questions she intended to ask him if ever given the chance.

Come to that, now that it was no longer possible to lead him directly to the journal, she'd been contemplating alternative ways to point him in the right direction. None of these were nearly as ideal, but she had to start somewhere. The urgency could no longer be avoided — she needed him to know the truth.

Writing him a message was the most obvious option, but how? She'd tried it as a cat at first, but the process of arranging bits of food one piece at a time would've taken hours, if not days. Stepping in something and using her footprints seemed plausible enough, but the end

result had been far too messy, resulting in nothing more than a lecture regarding the proper behavior of houseguests.

And then it came to her, only about a week after they'd left Hogwarts. She was in the study, lying in a thin beam of late afternoon sunshine that had managed to penetrate the room despite the tightly closed curtains. Lazily, she watched the dust motes dancing through the air, gradually coming to the realization that every surface in her immediate vicinity was covered in dust.

From there, it was a simple matter to find the kind of creature she was looking for. Caterpillars were small yet industrious — it only took a couple hours to spell out her message, as plain as day on the dusty kitchen table:

LIGATIS ANIMALIA  
GRIMMAULD PLACE  
SMALL GRAY JOURNAL

She was about to add something else, but it was too late for that. He was home. In her current form, she felt rather than heard the footsteps, thrumming through her tiny body like earthquakes, a perfect echo of her pounding heart. Just a little longer now... a glimpse of a shadow, and then she saw him clearly as he stepped into the kitchen.

It wasn't Severus.

## 23. Grasping for Truth

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### Chapter 23: Grasping for Truth

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Lily didn't have time to wonder what Peter Pettigrew was doing at Spinner's End. Severus strode into the kitchen just behind him, and then several things happened in a flash. He spotted her message, his dark eyes growing wide with shock. In the very same breath, he swept off his overcoat, flinging it on the table with such vehemence that she knew her handiwork was destroyed.

"Wormtail," he said, sounding perfectly calm as he turned to address their unwelcome guest. "The Dark Lord commanded you to assist me. I have yet to decide what that will entail, but rest assured it does *not* mean I intend on having you constantly underfoot. You will remain in your room unless otherwise instructed."

"My room?"

Severus gave him a scathing look. "And I thought rodents were known for their keen hearing."

Lily switched back to the cat, hovering around Severus's feet as he told Wormtail where to go. She hardly felt secure in *any* form now, but she wanted to be able to put up a fight if it came to that. After all, Wormtail had sensed something unusual about her the last time they'd been in close confines. She saw no reason to believe that this situation would be any different.

If anything, her position was even more precarious now. If he recognized her as the same presence he'd sensed at Hogwarts, wouldn't it arouse his suspicions to find her here with Severus? Yes... even more so since she'd be inextricably linked with Gryffindor Tower in his mind.

Severus hardly moved as the door closed behind Wormtail, just cocked his head to listen as the latter scuttled away. And then abruptly, he burst into motion, tossing out a hasty *Muffliato* before jerking his coat off the table.

"Fuck," he muttered, but then she jumped up on the table and his eyes latched on to her like a lifeline. 'Who did this?' he demanded with a slight tremor in his voice. "Was it you?"

He wasn't the only one who was shaky. Lily couldn't even react at first, stunned by the enormity of her first chance to communicate with him after twenty years of silence. But then she nodded, slow and deliberate. His eyes widened.

*Ask the right questions*, Severus, she silently beseeched him. *Please*.

He sucked in a sharp breath before collapsing into the nearest chair. "So you *are* human," he said slowly. "I was right?"

Another nod.

“And the journal... Grimmauld Place. You were trying to tell me about the spell. How to lift it?”

So he’d managed to read it after all. She closed her eyes in relief, then nodded again.

“And how does Black factor into this? Did he cast it on you?”

She shook her head, scrutinizing his expression as he sat in silence for several long moments. For someone who was usually a master at disguising his feelings, it seemed as if every emotion he’d ever felt was plain on his face. Amazement, fear, hope, lingering disbelief. And beneath that, something so powerful she couldn’t even put a name to it.

“It can’t be,” he muttered to himself. “It’s impossible.”

She moved closer, staring at him so intently that it seemed as if she tore the word out of him through sheer force of will.

“Lily?”

Without hesitation, she nodded.

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Insanity? Perhaps. But if there was a chance... even the *slightest* chance...

Severus took off for Grimmauld Place soon thereafter, having played a rather harrowing game of twenty questions to discover that the journal would be found in Sirius’s bedroom. What excuse could he give for needing to enter the private quarters of his former nemesis? Ordinarily, he would’ve been able to come up with something on the fly, but as it was, his thoughts were in such turmoil that he nearly spliced himself while Apparating. Shameful. He hadn’t done that since... well no, he’d *never* done it.

Fortunately, no one was in residence at Grimmauld aside from Molly and a few of the Weasley children. Molly was busy in the kitchen while her offspring... well, no telling what they were up to. All that mattered was that they were behind closed doors, unaware of his presence as he slipped up the stairs and into Black’s bedroom.

Nauseating. He didn’t know what was worse — the cheap Muggle pinups or the garish displays of Gryffindor banners that covered the room. Taking only the briefest moment to sneer at Black’s poor taste, he soon forgot about it entirely as he spotted the stack of books on the bedside table.

It wasn’t difficult to find the one he was looking for. Most were ornately decorated, with swirls of gilded scrollwork that had chipped and worn away with time. One, however, was plainly bound, lighter and thinner than the others, with a faded gray cover that might once have been blue.

Tucking it into his robes, he was almost to the door when something made him turn back and look at the room in a different light. Such a strange parallel... as much as he hated to think so, it reminded him of Spinner’s End. Not in outward appearance, of course, but just like his own house, it was like stepping into a time warp.

This was followed by a disconcerting realization. For all their differences, they'd had one important thing in common. Like Severus, Black had been unable to let go of the past, forever haunted by the memory of someone he'd loved and lost under the same tragic circumstances. And like Severus, he'd had to live with the knowledge that he might've prevented that tragedy if only he'd made a different choice.

That was the closest Severus ever came to sympathizing with Sirius Black, marked by a twinge of genuine grief. But somehow, it was enough.

Silently, he slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

"Severus? I didn't know you were here!"

His head jerked up and he spotted Molly Weasley at the bottom of the stairs, staring up at him with an expression of avid curiosity. Fuck.

"Hello, Molly. I was just looking for Albus. I thought he might be upstairs with the children."

Thankfully, she seemed to accept this, flashing him a benign smile. "I'm afraid we haven't heard from him in a few days. Shall I tell him to get in contact when he returns?"

"Yes, please."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"Not at all," he said smoothly. "Just a bit of paperwork for the upcoming school year."

"Of course. Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay and have something to eat? Arthur and the others should be back soon."

"Thank you, but I have other matters to attend to this evening."

Without another word, he hurried outside, Apparating straight back to Spinner's End. Now that he'd had time to get his thoughts straight, he couldn't help questioning his sanity for even partially believing what the cat had told him.

On the other hand, his earlier conviction hadn't changed. Even the slightest chance that it might be true was reason enough to take a closer look. He owed that to Lily. Hell, he owed it to himself.

Wormtail was skulking around the sitting room when Severus entered the house, which was hardly surprising. He wasn't stupid — he knew the Dark Lord had appointed the rodent to spy on him. Well, let him try. First, Severus was far too clever to have anything even remotely incriminating lying around. And second, even if Wormtail *did* stumble across information he wasn't supposed to have, it would be easy enough to ensure his silence.

"What did I tell you? Get back to your room."

Soon enough, Severus was in his own bedroom with a cup of tea and wards firmly in place, his feline companion at his side. He reached into his robes, withdrawing the journal as he settled himself into an armchair by the window. It smelled strongly of vanilla and dried grass, the familiar, comforting smells of an old book.

He took a deep breath, then opened it and began to read.



Skimming through the first half, he quickly ascertained that the journal had belonged to an ancestor of the Black family. She'd written extensively about her time at Hogwarts, from being sorted into Slytherin as a first year to her final day of NEWTS. It seemed she'd been married soon thereafter — he suffered through the endless ramblings of a giddy young bride, resisting the urge to throw the damn thing out the window.

Soon enough, he was back to wondering if this was just a cruel trick Sirius had planned months ago, hoping to torment him and make him look the fool. But then the handwriting changed, flowery girlish script replaced by the jagged scribbles of a woman in deep distress.

*I told Atrius, "Give Raviero what he wants. Why risk your life for some petty inheritance when my family's fortune is more than enough to sustain us?" He said I didn't understand: if he left his family's legacy in the hands of his brother, traitor that he is, he'd be no better than Raviero himself. It was his duty — more than that, his right to defend the noble house of Black.*

*They duel on the morrow, and the worst part is that I can't be with Atrius on what might very well be the last night of his life. He's afraid I might do something to prevent him from keeping his appointment (which, admittedly, I had planned upon). As such, he's secluded himself and warded the doors against me. What am I supposed to do?*

Severus flipped forward a few pages, bypassing a long, weepy diatribe detailing how miserable the girl would be without her dear husband and father of her children. Pitiable, perhaps, but not what he was after. He wasn't sure what he needed to find, but...

*I have performed a type of magic I didn't know existed. I have defeated death itself.*

He sat up straighter in his chair, staring hard at the words, certain he'd misread them.

*I have defeated death itself.*

No, there it was.

*I hardly know where to begin. Atrius tried to bind me to prevent me from attending the duel. But my magic has always been swifter than his, so it was easy to counteract that with a well-timed nonverbal. I made a good show of pretending to be affected by his body bind, only to Disapparate right behind him the minute he was gone. Atrius was furious, but what could he do? It was like that time back at Hogwarts when he told me...*

Impatient now, Severus flipped forward a couple more pages.

*Raviero raised his wand and I knew what was coming. I was grasping for something, anything that might prevent my husband's death. I couldn't come up with anything but senseless fragments... the summoning of an animal protector, of all things, along with some long forgotten charm meant to shield the soul from spiritual damage. Whatever I was thinking, it formulated itself as, "Ligatis Animalia!" I thought it as I aimed my wand at Atrius, at the very same moment Raviero screamed out, "Avada Kedavra!"*

*When the light faded, Atrius lay dead on the ground. My senses came back to me then, and I cast the Stunner I hadn't been able to remember in my previous panic. It was too late, far too late to matter, but I wasn't going to let Raviero walk away unscathed.*

Breathing hard now, Severus nearly ripped the parchment in his haste to turn the page.

*I don't know how long I wept over Atrius's body. Minutes? Hours? All I know is that at some point, a small, furry creature prodded at my leg. Too grief stricken to consider the rabbit's behavior peculiar, I pushed it away, only to watch in frustration as it hopped back to my side.*

*"GO!" I screamed, so vehemently that any other animal would've fled for its life. This one wouldn't budge.*

*Suddenly, it came back to me: Ligatis Animalia... could it be possible? Had I bound my husband's soul to this creature?*

*"Atrius?" I whispered. It nuzzled my leg and I began to tremble. "If you are Atrius... I mean, if he's in there somewhere, I need you to prove it to me. Hop around in a circle, then jump on my lap."*

*When it did exactly as it was told, I was more or less convinced, but I had a final test. "How many children do we have?" I started to lose faith when the rabbit just stared at me... until it suddenly hopped away, returning with one twig and then a second and a third, carefully dropping them in a row at my feet.*

*I've never cried harder than I did in that moment, not even when I thought him lost to me forever.*

*Indeed, I had done it. I'd saved my Atrius.*

Severus was trembling violently, ashamed yet unable to prevent a rush of tears from flowing down his cheeks. He looked over at the cat, saw those green eyes brimming over with what could only be human compassion, and he knew. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, he *knew*.

"This is what happened to you?" he whispered, his voice sounding hoarse and foreign to his ears. "That night he came for you, he... he..." But he didn't need to finish, as it all became abundantly clear. Three chances to step aside... she'd been one of the few victims that the Dark Lord had had no strong desire to kill. Perhaps he'd cast the spell as an experiment, having come across it in his own reading? Yes, yes... he'd often borrowed reading material from his followers, and the Black family library was one of the most prestigious in the country. It was possible — *probable* even — that he'd learned it from this very journal.

Had he known it would work? Severus hoped to the depths of his soul that he hadn't. The alternative was unthinkable — that he already knew Lily had survived and might be hunting for her even now.

"Lily," he whispered, still scarcely able to believe it. "You're alive?"

Solemnly, she nodded.

"And Black knew? Yes, of course he did. Bastard. Anyone else?"

He breathed a sigh of relief as she shook her head. "Good. We'll have to make sure it stays that way, at least for now." Still reeling from the shock, he struggled to make some logical sense of the situation. "So Black knew all about it. But how?"

Unable to respond, the cat gave him a frustrated look. Yes, *definitely* Lily. In fact, the similarities were so uncanny that Severus was amazed he hadn't figured it out before.

"My apologies," he said. "All right, how would Black have figured it out where others did not? Lucky chance? Was he a witness when it happened?"

She shook her head as he rattled off possibilities, until finally, he said, "He was an Animagus."

Eagerly, she bobbed her head.

"Hmmm. Well, that solves that mystery. The first of many, I'm afraid. So Animagus can... sense your presence? Then that must mean Wormtail..."

She nodded vigorously, staring back at him with eyes full of fear.

"Oh, fuck."

It was exceedingly poor timing on Pettigrew's part. A snuffle just outside the door, a slight shuffle. Severus knew damn well that Wormtail couldn't possibly have been aware of what was going on inside the room — he had it warded to the teeth. But still, he was out of his chair like a streak of lightning, the curse already halfway out of his mouth as he jerked open the door.

Wormtail squealed in agony, body spasming as he collapsed at his feet.

"I thought," Severus said, his voice low and menacing, "I instructed you to stay in your room."

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*"Legilimens!"*

Wormtail's resistance, feeble at best, was quickly obliterated by savage determination. After examining dozens of memories, casting them aside like so much rubbish, Severus focused on what had transpired in the kitchen just a couple hours before. No, Wormtail hadn't seen the message on the table. His reaction time (and no doubt his reading capabilities) were far slower than Severus's own swift reflexes.

Satisfied on that point at least, Severus delved a little further back. No... when Wormtail had been at Hogwarts with the Weasley boy, there was no indication that he'd discovered Lily's identity, or even that he'd encountered her at all. He'd had strange interactions with other animals, including a vicious attack on Longbottom's toad and an all-out war with that ugly ginger cat that liked to follow Granger around. But there was no trace of the little calico. Lily. Dear god...

Withdrawing, Severus cast a hasty *Obliviate*, knowing he'd have to proceed with the utmost caution. The situation was certainly not as bad as it could've been, but he'd have to keep his wits about him to prevent it from becoming so. This was doubly true while he had no way of knowing how this "sensing" actually worked. Would Wormtail be able to smell her? Overhear her thoughts? Whatever it was, it seemed best to keep him as far away from her as possible.

“Stay here,” he snarled. “If I catch you out of this room again without my permission...” There was no need to finish the thought.

Nonetheless, he took the extra precaution of casting an alert system on the door. A high-pitched scream... yes, very nice. There was only one other opening Wormtail could access, even if he switched to rodent form. Smirking to himself, he fixed the vent with a lovely little hex. Oh, Wormtail was free to use it all he liked... if he didn't mind being covered from head to toe in stinging fire ants every time he tried.

Satisfied, Severus headed back to his bedroom. He found the cat perched on the windowsill, staring back at him with wide, worried eyes. Something twisted in his gut in response, a crippling combination of exaltation and terror. No... no matter what it took, he couldn't lose her again. He would die, and gladly, before he allowed that to happen.

“Don't worry,” he said, rather more gruffly than he'd intended. “He's shut up in his room for now. Will he be able to sense you if he stays there?”

She shook her head, looking more than ever as if she wished to speak.

“Very good. Does he know who you are?”

That earned him a frustrated look, which brought home the fact that even “yes or no” questions left gray areas that were beyond her capabilities. Obviously, he needed a better way to communicate with her, but how? His thoughts were still spinning off in a hundred different directions as he grabbed a piece of parchment from his desk, scrawling the words ‘yes’ and ‘no’ with about a dozen variations in between.

The act of doing so brought back a memory, nearly forgotten, of a Muggle toy she'd shown him once. Something called a Magic 8 Ball, a cheap plastic mockery of a fortune-telling tool. They'd played with it for hours, Lily giggling uncontrollably as Severus had proven it wrong again and again.

*“Am I a wizard?”*

*Don't count on it.*

Unable to help a small smile at the memory, Severus laid the parchment in front of her, hoping his own methods would prove more accurate.

“Does Wormtail know who you are?” he repeated, his voice soft.

She extended her paw, laying it directly over the place where he'd written, *I don't believe so*.

“And the Dark Lord?”

*I don't know.*

Severus leaned back in his armchair, letting out a heavy sigh. “He hasn't said anything, at least not to me. But then again, he wouldn't, would he?”

*Probably not.*

“Do you know how to lift the spell?”

This time, she didn't bother with the parchment. She shook her head, her eyes full of despair. But then those eyes flickered to the one thing he'd forgotten until this moment, the journal he'd set aside upon the stunning revelation that Lily was alive and sitting right beside him.

He picked it up, skimming the remainder of the contents until he came to a paragraph that was written in a different, somewhat newer hand.

*Herein lies the account of my grandmother, Elyria Black Rosewood, and the circumstances under which she discovered the Ligatis Animalia charm. The following pages contain further details regarding the charm's effects, which I have learned through the experiences of my grandfather, Atrius Rosewood.*

Sucking in a sharp breath, he turned to the next page.

## 24. From Heaven to Hell

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### Chapter 24: From Heaven to Hell

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1.) *The spell must be cast at the moment of death, requiring the soul's natural departure from the body in order to work. It is a protective spell, which doesn't allow for the forcible removal of the soul as can be found in Dark magic.*

2.) *The target gains the ability to transfer to any animal he or she wishes, with the exception of magical beasts and humans. This is likely because the latter two possess much more complex brain structures\*, negating the natural dominance that occurs in cohabitation with simpler creatures.*

*\* This holds true even for Muggles, surprisingly enough.*

3.) *If the host animal dies, then the soul is released and may find a new host. "Soul" or "Spirit" death may only occur to the body's natural resident.*

4.) *Finally, it is possible for the soul to be restored to human form. Some natural aging will have occurred, though this process seems to slow somewhat while under the effects of the charm. In returning to human form, the target resumes a normal lifespan like any other mortal being. Recently discovered through the death of my grandfather, Atrius Rosewood, age 134. May he rest in peace.*

*Please refer to the following pages for details on charm removal and the regenerative process.*

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Severus flipped through the remaining pages, squinting and swearing under his breath as he struggled to make out the words. "A potion, obviously, though only a couple of the ingredients are legible. And this incantation... I can't read it at all. Fuck."

Lily didn't react, but he could tell by the look in her eyes that she agreed with his sentiment.

"So I'm guessing this is why Black kept it a secret. Thought he could figure it out for himself?" At her nod, he snorted. "An exercise in futility, to say the least. Potions was never exactly his forte."

Severus hardly knew what to say next, as a thousand disconnected thoughts and feelings shuddered through him like tiny earthquakes. When he finally managed to speak again, there was no logical order to his questions. He just fired them at her, one after another, while she obliged by using the piece of parchment to answer to the best of her ability.

"So you've been around... all this time?"

Yes.

“Here, Hogwarts, Grimmauld Place... well I suppose if you can switch at will, you’ve been able to travel as you please. But that must mean Wormtail *did* encounter you. The toad, the Granger girl’s cat... that was you?”

*Sometimes.*

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Severus wondered if she’d been inhabiting the toad during that unfortunate poisoning incident. Not that he’d meant to cause the creature any real harm, but his actions would’ve certainly suggested otherwise. And that was just the first of many situations he was beginning to examine in a different and far more distressing light. How much had she seen over the years? Did she hate him for what he’d allowed himself to become?

No... if that were the case, she wouldn’t even be here, would she? She wouldn’t have sought him out, would never have trusted him with the truth. And she sure as hell wouldn’t have spent the past few months in his private quarters back at Hogwarts, seeming to enjoy his company as much as he’d enjoyed hers. On top of all that, she’d even shared his bed at night, which she would’ve hardly done if...

At that last thought, his eyes grew wide at the implications.

“You... Lily... you’ve been *sleeping* with me?”

She ducked her head, placing her paw over the spot on the parchment where he’d scrawled, *Obviously*.

Fortunately, his mind did nothing to sexualize the idea, which would’ve been downright disturbing in light of her current form. It did stir up other feelings, however, things he hadn’t felt in so long that he didn’t quite know how to identify them or even if he was ready to do so.

“You must’ve seen quite a lot over the years,” he said, switching directions again. “Were you there that night? That night when you... died?” Because of course, she had, at least in a physical sense.

Yes.

“You saw me...?” He closed his eyes, assaulted by a vivid picture of himself cradling her body in his arms, cursing and weeping, wishing for all the world that he’d died right along with her. If she’d witnessed that, she could have no doubt as to the depth of his feelings for her. That realization left him feeling vulnerable, frightened, but there was no shrinking from it either. Not now.

He forced his eyes open, gazing directly into hers, relieved when he found no trace of contempt in her gentle gaze.

“And you know about the vow I made to protect... Harry?” The name tasted foreign on his tongue, more than a little unpleasant. But he couldn’t imagine referring to him as ‘Potter’ while speaking to her. “The fact that you’re alive changes nothing where he’s concerned. I swore to look after him, and I will. I promise you that. As for the rest of it... Lily, if I’ve been hard on him at times...”

When she abruptly shook her head, urging him to stop, he knew he wasn't off the hook for the way he'd treated the boy. The frustration in her eyes made that all too clear. But this was one issue that was far too complex to resolve just now, when she was only capable of the most rudimentary communications. Fair enough. He'd much prefer to put that particular conversation off for as long as possible.

"Well," he said after a moment. "This certainly complicates things, doesn't it? No, don't look at me like that. The fact that I didn't write 'I'm sorry' on this parchment was intentional, I assure you. You have *nothing* to apologize for. Nothing. On the contrary, you don't know how much..."

He trailed off, stunned all over again by the enormity of the situation. Lily. Alive. Right here beside him, at least in soul and spirit. Swallowing hard, he shielded himself from his rawest and most vulnerable emotions, determined to focus on practical matters.

"This must be kept a secret," he said, feeling a bit more composed. "As it stands now, the Dark Lord has no idea where to find you, if he even suspects you might've survived in the first place. We have to make sure it stays that way. As for Dumbledore..."

She hissed, a reaction he found surprising, to say the least. "You don't trust Dumbledore?"

*No.*

"King of the Gryffindors himself?"

*No.*

"Why not?" And then cursing himself as he remembered her inability to answer that particular question, he said, "Forgive me. Is it because you don't trust him?"

*Yes.*

"But you know he's on our side, don't you?" And then he understood, having had similar concerns himself. "It must be the boy then, yes? Encouraging his reckless behavior, withholding information? For what it's worth, I'd be inclined to agree. But you must realize that Dumbledore is also our best hope in defeating the Dark Lord."

*Maybe.*

He desperately wanted to know why she seemed so skeptical, but that would have to wait. "The boy must not know about you," he said instead. "You've seen enough to understand that he's privy to the Dark Lord's mind? Then you know that connection goes both ways. Not only would it put you at risk, but we've already seen how he can be lured into danger on behalf of someone he loves."

Her eyes were sad, regretful, but she nodded without a hint of protest. That was surprising. As much as Severus loved Lily, had loved her from the first moment he'd ever seen her, even he had to admit that impulsiveness was one of her greatest flaws. The Lily he remembered had been ruled by emotions, never stopping to think about what she was doing before she did it. Indeed, he'd been stung by that rashness on numerous occasions.

But of course, twenty years had passed, not to mention that her current limitations had to have taught her a great deal of patience. That was something they'd both learned over the



years and would have to continue to rely upon as the war unfolded. He was relieved that she seemed to realize this, just as he did.

Yet patience was the last thing on his mind as he picked up the journal again, scanning the damaged pages for any scrap of information that might prove useful. There was precious little to work with, but that did nothing to dissuade his newfound sense of purpose.

"I promise you," he told her, his voice beginning to tremble. "I'll find a way to make this right. I don't know what's going to happen, or if I'll even survive this war. But I have no intention of dying just yet. Not until I've figured out a way to bring you back. Whatever it takes, Lily..."

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Lily was almost relieved when Severus left. Not that she didn't want to be close to him, that she wasn't thrilled to be able to communicate with him to some degree. It was just so overwhelming. She needed time to adjust, a chance to put her thoughts and feelings in order. That was impossible to do when he was sitting right next to her... when every word, every look, sent her senses reeling all over again.

Severus, too, seemed to need a little space. There at the end of their conversation, his eyes had been filled with tears, which would've spilled down his cheeks in a torrent if he'd allowed it. Was that why he'd left, because he was ashamed to cry in front of her? The thought wrenched at her heart. Poor Severus. If she was having this much trouble bringing her emotions under control, what must it be like for him? Up until a couple hours ago, he'd spent the last fifteen years believing she was dead.

Really, it was a wonder that he'd been able to hold himself together as well as he had.

"Stay in here," he'd instructed on his way out. "Even if Wormtail starts skulking around, there's no way he can break through the wards I've placed on this room. Are you all right for now? Very well... I'll be back in a couple hours."

Emotionally exhausted, she was half-asleep when he returned. Going from groggy to wide-eyed and curious in a matter of seconds, she stared at the paper bag he had tucked beneath one arm... from a Muggle toy store, of all places.

"Well," he said with a smirk, sounding much more composed than he had earlier. 'It's good to know that my ability to frighten children isn't limited to my illustrious teaching career.' Opening the bag, he withdrew several brightly colored packages. "I remembered seeing these at your house when we were children. Certainly not the most effective solution, but perhaps it will do for the time being."

With a sharp pang of nostalgia, Lily watched as he spread the items on the floor. In the years before Hogwarts, her family's refrigerator had been covered with them — large, neon colored letters made of plastic with magnets affixed to the back. Of course, Severus could've just as easily written individual letters on slips of parchment, but these would be far easier to handle, which he must've realized. It would still be clumsy and time-consuming to compose more than a sentence or two, but progress was progress.

She hopped down from the bed, eager to spell out the first and most important thing she wanted to say to him.

## THANK YOU

Severus stared down at the message, neither moving or speaking for several long moments. His expression showed flickers of a wide range of emotions — amazement, guilt, something close to tenderness, followed by a flash of fear. And then finally, he turned away.

“It’s late,” he said brusquely. “Perhaps we should continue this tomorrow.”

He glanced at the bed and then back at her, looking uncertain. Wasn’t it obvious that she intended to sleep with him, being as she’d been doing so for months? Apparently not. Severus had changed tremendously over the years, had matured beyond all expectation. But in this, at least, she saw echoes of his younger self... that little boy who’d hardly dared to believe that anyone would willingly choose to be in close proximity to him.

With a twinge of sympathy, she launched herself onto the bed, settling herself among the pillows.

“So,” he said under his breath, looking both surprised and relieved. ‘That’s the way of it then.’ He removed his outer layers, then hesitated, glancing up at her with an odd expression. “I’m guessing you’ve already seen me in various states of undress?”

She gave him a look that was somewhere between guilty and smug.

“I see. And you still want to share my bed? Well, I suppose you couldn’t have been *too* horrified by what you saw.”

Rolling her eyes wasn’t possible, but she managed to communicate the sentiment. He chuckled, stripping down to his trousers before sliding between the sheets.

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Lulled by the sound of Severus’s steady breathing, Lily had just fallen asleep when it happened. His breath hitched and he sat straight up in bed, grappling for the ring he’d placed on the bedside table a few minutes before. “Lumos,” he uttered, managing to sound both drowsy and fully alert. And then, “Dumbledore?”

“Severus... need you... please.”

“I’m on the way.”

He practically sprang from bed, shooting her a brief glance as he retrieved his discarded robes. “I need to go to Hogwarts,” he said, his voice low and deadly serious. “Without delay. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

Perhaps she shouldn’t have done it. But the spider was crawling up the wall just a few feet away, begging her to seize the opportunity. A quick switch and she was safely concealed in the hem of Severus’s robe, whirling, whirling, until the world set itself to rights again at the front gates of Hogwarts. Severus’s sense of urgency was palpable. He ran across the grounds and burst into the castle, breathing heavily as he raced through the halls. In seconds, he was at the door to the Headmaster’s office, muttering the password and then tapping his foot impatiently as the gargoyle slid aside by inches.

They entered to find Dumbledore slumped over in his chair, his face haggard, complexion tinged with a sickly shade of green. Trembling violently, he couldn't even speak as he gestured for Severus to come closer.

"My god... what have you done?"  
But Severus didn't wait for an answer.

Overwhelmed by the frantic activity, Lily detached herself from his robes, perching right there on the desk as she watched the scene unfold. Back and forth, back and forth... Severus was unstoppable. She couldn't count the incantations he recited, had no idea how he'd managed to get his hands on the potions he needed so quickly.

"Why?" he demanded when Dumbledore had finally recovered somewhat. "Why did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

"I... was a fool. Sorely tempted..."

"Tempted by what?" Severus asked, though of course, Dumbledore didn't respond.

As for what transpired next, Lily could only listen in growing horror. Dark magic... the Headmaster had maybe a year to live, though Severus had done his best to mitigate the effects of the curse. But that wasn't the shocking part, even though she was saddened by the dismal prognosis. No... far worse were the revelations that followed, which in the end, made it difficult to feel anything but blind fury toward Dumbledore, withered hand and all.

"I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me."

"The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed," Severus responded, and although he concealed it well, she could tell he was distressed by the idea.

Lily was more conflicted — she had no love for Draco, who'd mistreated her son just as his parents had done to her. Pureblood supremacists, Death Eaters... would it be so tragic to lessen their numbers? But even as the thought crossed her mind, it was wiped away by a rush of guilt. He might be a nasty piece of work, but Draco was just a child. And no matter how she felt about him, he clearly meant something to Severus.

"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have," Dumbledore said, sounding nonchalant. "Now, I should have thought the natural successor to the job, once Draco fails, is yourself?"

"That, I think, is the Dark Lord's plan."

The full implications of that statement were unthinkable. But of course, if Dumbledore already knew about it, there must be an alternate plan? Anxiously, she waited to hear it, almost grateful that she didn't have the ability to scream with impatience as they discussed what would happen to the school following the Headmaster's death. Naturally, it was alarming to think that it might fall into the hands of Voldemort, but Severus's vow to look after the students was reassuring.

Reassuring, though not surprising in the least. He cared about the children, despite all appearances to the contrary, would've laid down his life for them. Perhaps he couldn't let his feelings show — to do so could easily mean blowing his cover even if he *had* been the

demonstrative type, which of course, he wasn't. But those feelings were real nonetheless, and might very well save more than a few innocent lives by the end of it all.

Dumbledore proceeded to ask him to keep an eye on Draco, to prevent him from causing harm to any of the other students with his schemes. That, at least, was understandable... Lily had absolute faith that Severus could ward off any potential catastrophes. Draco's abilities were mediocre at best from what she'd seen, and there were few who could hope to outwit Severus. Beyond truly exceptional wizards and full-grown ones at that, anyone would be a fool to even try.

"Ultimately, of course, there is only one thing to be done if we are to save him from Lord Voldemort's wrath."

Raising his eyebrows, Severus said, "Are you intending to let him kill you?"

"Certainly not. *You* must kill me."

Lily felt as if the air had been sucked out of the room. He couldn't be serious. Didn't he realize what that would mean? Beyond the indescribable amount of suffering Severus would endure on a personal level, he'd become a traitor in the eyes of the Wizarding world. But of course, Dumbledore knew that, must have understood that he was setting Severus up to be hated, reviled, a potential target to the very same people he'd spent the majority of his adult life trying to help.

Oh yes, Dumbledore knew... and he had the audacity to suggest it anyway.

Never, never had Lily hated anyone more than she did in that moment. Not even Voldemort himself. After all, betrayal and treachery were to be expected from a Dark wizard. But one who claimed to fight for the side of the Light? The hypocrisy made her feel physically ill.

Recovering his wits, Severus responded with biting sarcasm. "Would you like me to do it now? Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?"

"Oh, not quite yet," Dumbledore said, and Lily couldn't believe he had the nerve to appear almost *cheerful* about the awful thing he was asking Severus to do. "I daresay the moment will present itself in due course. Given what has happened tonight, we can be sure that it will happen within a year."

"If you don't mind dying, why not let Draco do it?"

"That boy's soul is not yet so damaged. I would not have it ripped apart on my account."

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

Severus's words, spoken in a ragged whisper, tore her heart to pieces. Gone were the eyes of the man she'd come to know, replaced by those of the boy he'd once been. Frightened, vulnerable, and so very full of sorrow, as they'd always appeared when something — or *someone* — had given him yet another reason to lose faith. Faith in compassion, faith in love, faith in his own worth. Like a star in the night sky plummeting to the earth, dead, gone, never to be revived again.

The act itself was terrible enough to contemplate. But even that wasn't half as brutal as Dumbledore's confirmation that after years of faithful service, a relationship that should've

created a bond of trust, Severus's mind, his heart, his soul, were worth nothing to him. He was no more than a weapon to be used or discarded entirely once he'd served his purpose.

In this, Lily realized, Dumbledore was no better than Voldemort himself. And with that, the last of her childhood illusions melted into nothing, blown away like so much dust.

## 25. Bound by Duty

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### Chapter 25: Bound by Duty

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Occlumency had never served Severus so well.

Combined with a healthy dose of Dreamless Sleep, his shields helped him sleep through the rest of the night and well into following day. It was fortunate, perhaps even his salvation, that he wasn't summoned during that time. His usual ironclad control would've been shaky at best, weakened by a dangerous combination of shock and exhaustion.

But even after a substantial rest, fortified by several cups of strong black coffee, he was still struggling to get his bearings. How the hell was he supposed to manage all this? On top of keeping an eye on Potter, which was already a full-time job, now he was expected to watch after Draco, too, making sure that no students were harmed in his frantic attempts to assassinate the most powerful wizard in existence. Oh yes, the very same wizard whom he was expected to kill by the end of the school year.

Meanwhile, he was obligated to play the loyal Death Eater, knowing that the tiniest slip would no doubt result in an excruciating death. To that end, he'd have to spend the rest of the summer keeping Wormtail from nosing around in his private affairs. And if that weren't enough to keep him occupied, he still had a teaching career to worry about.

Groaning softly, Severus buried his head in his hands, wanting nothing more than to crawl back under the blankets and stay there for months, possibly even years. But of course, surrender wasn't an option. There was nothing to do but keep moving forward.

Gradually, he became aware of soft noises somewhere in the vicinity of his feet. He glanced down and spotted the cat, who was entirely focused on the letters she was trying to arrange in some semblance of logical order.

And here was another concern, still too unreal to count among his ordinary troubles. Lily's protection, her concealment... his determination to devote what little spare time he had to finding a solution to her predicament. That was no less daunting than all his other obligations, to be sure, but it was impossible to see it in the same light.

#### TALK TO ME

He stared down at the message, his customary need for caution at odds with the overwhelming desire to come clean. Well, why *shouldn't* he tell her the truth? She was the only one he felt he could talk to freely, and in any case, he couldn't bear the thought of painting himself as a traitor in her eyes if and when he was forced to kill Dumbledore. Everyone else, fine, but not her.

And so he explained what had happened the previous night, expecting her to recoil in shock. Instead, she just gazed at him steadily until he finished, then spelled out a second

message.

I KNOW

He frowned in confusion, and then his eyes grew wide. “You were with me? How?”

SPIDER

“You can switch to... insects? Interesting. Well, I suppose I can’t hope to keep any secrets from you, can I?” She shook her head as he continued. “What he wishes me to do... I have no choice. I know that. But I can’t imagine how...”

DON’T

His lips twisted into a sad little smirk. “I have to. I will not go back on my word. In any case, he’s right — it’s the only way to spare Draco, to save Dumbledore himself from a much more painful end. A mercy killing, which I suppose I can understand. That hardly makes it easier, of course, but perhaps...”

Shaking her head again, Lily began adding letters to her previous message. Trailing off, he watched her curiously until she completed her task, looking up at him with eyes full of sorrow.

THEY DON’T DESERVE YOU

Severus had no idea how to respond to that. It moved something in him, something he’d assumed to be long since dead and gone. And yet he couldn’t forget who he was, his numerous flaws and countless mistakes. Were it not for him, it would have never come to this. That fucking prophecy... did she know about it? He figured not, simply because he couldn’t see where she could have forgiven him if she did.

Well, this was what his life was about, wasn’t it? The endless struggle for redemption? Yes, that and nothing more. He had to remember that, keep reminding himself that whatever time he had with her was only a temporary reprieve. There were no happy endings for him, little chance that he’d even survive this war.

What would it matter if she hated him when she discovered the truth? Oh, it would hurt like hell, no doubt about that. But he wasn’t acting for his own benefit, believing the prize was his to be won at the end of it all. His promise to protect the boy had been made for her sake, just as bringing her back would serve the same purpose. The comfort of knowing he’d created a brighter future for her was all he had any right to hope for.

And perhaps in the end, that would be enough.

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Eventually, Lily was able to make Severus understand that Wormtail wouldn’t be able to sense her presence while in human form. That was a relief — she was tired of spending her days cooped up in the bedroom, which was unbearably stuffy on hot afternoons. Besides, Severus was eager to start his experiments, and she wanted to be with him as much as possible throughout the process.

For the time being, he spent most of his time in his study, settled in his armchair with a cup of coffee and stacks of books on the table beside him. He'd stay there from morning until well after midnight, so intent on his research that he would've forgotten to eat if it wasn't for Wormtail.

The rodent didn't care a damn about anyone else's needs, of course, but he'd been made to understand what was expected of him, which amounted to the duties of a house-elf. Lily suspected that this had more to do with humiliation than hot meals or a clean house, but for all his hostile glances, Wormtail didn't dare refuse. Severus had proven that he could be... brutal when his orders weren't followed to the letter.

Could she blame him? Not in the least. On the contrary, she was impressed by his restraint, knowing he hated Wormtail at least as much as she did.

Despite their unwelcome houseguest, the days passed peacefully, giving them several weeks of respite before reality intruded once more. It was late in the evening — Severus had his nose buried in "101 Lesser Known Uses for Mandrake Root" while Lily lay curled up on the couch. She was nearly asleep when the knock came, soft and almost timid somehow. Startled, she sat straight up, staring at Severus with wide, worried eyes. Visitors were rare at Spinner's End, almost unheard of at this time of night.

"What the fuck?" he muttered under his breath. And then glancing at her, he hissed, "Under the chair. Keep out of sight."

Lily heard rather than saw what happened next. Death Eaters... how wonderful! Narcissa sounded gentler, more human than she remembered, but Bellatrix was as nasty as ever. She could tell them apart by their shoes — expensive and almost prim for one, blunt and utilitarian for the other. Strange that one could tell so much about a person by their footwear.

Severus, or rather, his dragonhide boots, appeared in her line of vision as he settled himself in the armchair across from his guests. Those boots were tough as nails, crafted to withstand anything, and yet retained their elegance with their smooth lines and finely etched scrollwork. Yes, she thought to herself with an inward smile. *Very appropriate indeed.*

"We... we are alone, aren't we?" Narcissa said, bringing Lily back to more serious matters.

"Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail's here, but we're not counting vermin, are we?"

Wormtail, who'd been skulking behind the door, was sent off to retrieve wine, though he managed to put up at least a feeble resistance. Didn't want to be humiliated in front of his fellow Death Eaters? Well, too bad for him. It was the least he deserved.

And then Lily forgot about that entirely as Severus and his guests raised a toast to Voldemort. Of course, it was no more than he had to do in order to maintain his cover, but it was still uncomfortable to witness. To realize just how good he was at playing double agent... so much that even Lily, who knew his motivations better than anyone, had to keep reminding herself that it was all an act.

"Severus, I know I ought not to be here," Narcissa said, sounding shaky. "I have been told to say nothing to anyone, but..."



“Then you ought to hold your tongue!” Bellatrix snapped. “Particularly in present company!”

“‘Present company’? And what am I to understand by that, Bellatrix?”

“That I don’t trust you, Snape, as you very well know!”

Lily swallowed a rush of fear, reminding herself that Severus had the situation under control. But knowing he lived on a knife’s edge was one thing. Witnessing it for herself was another matter entirely. One slip of the tongue, one tiny mistake, could spell his death... and knowing Voldemort, prolonged torture seemed more likely than a quick end. It came home to her then just how brave he really was, how much self-control it must’ve taken to appear unruffled as Bellatrix hurled accusations at him, each more vicious than the last.

Unruffled? No, it was more than that. He openly challenged her as he twisted her insinuations to suit his purpose... not only to portray himself as innocent of the crime in question, but to make her look the fool. He wasn’t just an effective spy, but a master at the art of deception, manipulative to the core when he had to be. A true Slytherin, which would’ve been disturbing if she didn’t know by now that he was so much more than that.

“You are avoiding my last question, Snape,” Bellatrix persisted. “Harry Potter. You could have killed him at any point in the past five years. You have not done it. Why?”

This explanation was every bit as necessary as the others, though it was painful to listen while Severus criticized her son. Mediocre, arrogant, obnoxious, self-satisfied... how much of what he said about Harry was for the benefit of his audience, and how much did he truly believe? Come to that, how much of his ill-treatment over the years had been done with the intention of keeping his cover, and how much had been genuine dislike?

Definitely a conversation she wanted to have, though not until her current limitations were no longer an issue. Both the subject matter and the emotions involved were far too complex to attempt it just yet.

For now, it was enough that Bellatrix had been silenced, with Severus sounding downright smug as he turned his attention to her sister.

“Now... you came to ask me for help, Narcissa?”

It soon became apparent that Narcissa was terrified for Draco, hoping that Severus might be able to intervene on his behalf. Lily could hardly blame her for that, even found herself sympathizing with the raw emotion in the woman’s voice. She seemed much more human than she had during their school years, when she’d been cold and condescending, never bothering to speak with anyone except her fellow Slytherins. It would’ve been easy to say that the pain she was suffering now was no more than she deserved, but having experienced the fear of losing a child for herself, Lily found it difficult to see it that way. She hoped that Severus would be able to protect him somehow, especially if he could find an alternate solution to killing Dumbledore in the process.

“It might be possible... for me to help Draco.”

“Severus — oh, Severus — you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?”

"I can try," he said quietly.

Narcissa went to her knees, kneeling just a few inches from Lily's hiding place. Weeping with gratitude, she said, "Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?"

Lily froze, as no doubt Severus would've done if he'd had the luxury. But she didn't have to see his face to know that his expression would've been as stoic as ever, for all that he must've been reeling on the inside. Surely he'd find a clever way to sidestep it, just as he had with countless...

Bellatrix howled with laughter. "Aren't you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he'll try, I'm sure. The usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action... oh, on the Dark Lord's orders, of course!"

And with that, her stomach plummeted to her toes.

"Certainly, Narcissa," he said, sounding perfectly composed. "I shall make the Unbreakable Vow."

And then he was on his knees, too, facing Narcissa, giving instructions to Bellatrix... no, this couldn't be happening. There had to be a way out, some loophole...

"Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes?" Narcissa said.

"I will."

"And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?"

"I will."

But just as Lily breathed a sigh of relief, her hopes were crushed as Narcissa recited the final part of the vow.

"And, should it prove necessary... If it seems Draco will fail... will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?"

There was a brief hesitation this time, but Severus's voice was steady when he said, "I will."

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The weeks that followed were fairly uneventful. Severus continued with his research, relying heavily upon further reading combined with his own expertise to develop several plausible theories. It was best to work on them simultaneously... he didn't want to put either himself or Lily through the torment of waiting for months to see if one would pan out, only to have to start over from scratch. Besides, it was hard to imagine he'd have that kind of time.

This was confirmed in late July when he received Dumbledore's response to his latest application for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. APPROVED. He'd already known this was to be his final year of teaching. Was this meant to be a consolation prize? No... Dumbledore always had multiple reasons for whatever he chose to do, but it was hard to believe that Severus's personal preferences were high on that list.

It was far more likely that with war upon their doorsteps, Dumbledore wanted the children to have at least one year of training provided by a competent teacher. That would hardly be enough, of course, but Severus supposed it was better than nothing.

He was summoned several more times in the weeks leading up to his return to Hogwarts, but again, these were uneventful affairs. The Dark Lord was complacent for the time being, contented with his impending vengeance against Lucius and the random acts of brutality his Death Eaters were committing against Muggles and Wizards alike. It couldn't last, of course... the Dark Lord certainly wasn't known for his patience. But for the time being, Severus was doing his best to rest and recharge in preparation for the trials to come.

And then late in August, he received a special summons, one that left him with no choice but to leave Lily alone with Wormtail without any opportunity to warn her. He hadn't seen her for hours — she'd gone out exploring that afternoon and had not yet returned. And while he tried to wait for her, he could only afford to delay a matter of minutes before the Dark Lord would become suspicious.

"Stay in your room," he snarled at Wormtail, for all the good it would do. The sniveling rodent was growing bolder by the day, having come to the realization that Severus could only go so far in his attempts to restrain him. Well, that was one good thing about returning to Hogwarts... some of his students might be obnoxious beyond all comprehension, but they couldn't hold a candle to Wormtail.

Casting a final glance around the empty study, he sighed heavily, pressing his fingers to the Mark.

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Lily had made no attempt to tell Severus where she went in the afternoons. Maybe someday, but for now it was too personal for that, far too hard to explain with a handful of plastic letters. Revisiting the past would've been a fair explanation, but it was more than that. She visited her childhood home, lingered for hours in the playground where she and Severus had met, and visited her parents's graves, attempting to reconcile herself not only with the past, but also with the present and future.

So much was uncertain, and it felt like there was nothing she could do to change the course of the events that were about to unfold. Even if Severus brought her back in time to take part in the war, what would that mean? She hadn't practiced magic in fifteen years, had forgotten what it was like to even live as a human. Would she still have her powers? Would she remember the spells that could mean life or death for her loved ones? And what effect would it have on the Wizarding world when it was discovered that she'd been alive all this time?

More importantly, how would it affect Harry?

These were the questions that prompted her wanderings, driven by the need to seek out reminders of a simpler time. It was the best way to clear her head in the midst of so much turmoil.

Still, there was a certain strangeness in revisiting the places of her childhood after all these years. The more she tried to recapture the past, the more it seemed as if she were viewing another person's memories, not her own. They were no less vivid and poignant, and yet, it

seemed surreal that she'd ever been so innocent, so full of confidence in herself and the world around her. She'd known nothing of caution, accepting things at face value rather than taking the time to figure out what was truly right for her.

So much had changed, yet she couldn't say she was sorry for it. Sorry for the war, yes. Sorry that her loved ones were in danger. But the changes to herself during all her years of solitude? She'd learned what it was to be patient rather than acting on impulse, had been forced into a situation where unable to talk, she'd learned to truly listen. And while she couldn't see how just yet, she hoped those qualities would serve her well through the trials to come.

It was well after nightfall when she returned to Spinner's End. She was none too happy about that — Severus was likely to be worried by now, and the last thing she wanted to do was to give him yet another concern on top of the huge burden he was already carrying. That was something she'd have to be more cautious about in the future.

Surprised that he wasn't in his study, she bounded up the stairs, discovering that his bedroom, too, was empty. Unusual... but then again, he had mentioned that he intended to start working in his lab over the next few days. Was that where he was? If so, she didn't want to disturb him.

Instead, she composed a message on the bedroom floor, concentrating hard as she slid the plastic letters into place.

SORRY SEV

The nickname didn't quite fit him as an adult. No, he was far too dignified these days, at least in her eyes. Abbreviating it was just a matter of expediency, though it did make his lips twitch into a little smile every time he saw it.

*You...*

Her head jerked up, eyes darting wildly around the room. Impossible... she was alone. She had to be. And yet, she heard the softest scuffle, spotted a tiny crevice at the baseboard on the opposite side of the room. It hadn't been there... even just yesterday, it hadn't been there. She would've seen it, would've known.

All she could see was his eyes at first, glittering, sinister in the darkness. But then he crept forward, and she spotted a long, pointed nose, ragged fur, a strange metallic glint where one foot was supposed to be. Oh, fuck.

*You*, he repeated in her mind, his phantom voice dripping with malevolence. *Who are you?*

## 26. Disposing of Rodents

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### Chapter 26: Disposing of Rodents

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Perhaps it wasn't the most sensible thing to do. But in the moment, fear triumphed over logic, caution giving way to pure animal instinct. Kill or be killed. There was no alternative but to let the rat run straight to Voldemort with his suspicions. And what then? What terrible punishments would Severus have to endure for guarding her secret?

Horried by the thought, Lily chased the rat as he scampered along the hall, straight down the stairs and into the study where Severus's protective wards were not in place. Too late, she realized her mistake, as Wormtail shifted into human form, capturing her by the nape of the neck.

"Thought he was clever, didn't he? I couldn't have crossed the threshold of that room in *any* form. But..." He gave her a scratch under the chin, which was far more unnerving than any attempts to hurt her would've been. "I guess he never wondered what I was doing up in my little prison all afternoon. Never imagined I might be chewing my way through just a bit at a time. After his tea, of course. Mustn't forget the bloody tea!"

Lily struggled against his grip, even though she knew there was no hope of breaking free.

"So," he said after a moment. "Snape is hiding an Animagus in his house. Unregistered, no doubt. But why? And why would that same Animagus trouble herself to spell out messages for him, referring to him by a nickname that only Lily Potter ever used?"

Trying not to cringe at the sound of her name, she attempted a blank, uncomprehending stare. It was met by a flash of yellow teeth from her captor, his eyes feverish with excitement.

"Switch back. I want to see who you are."

Of course, that was impossible. She renewed her struggles, attempting to buy some time, hoping like hell Severus would return before it was too late.

"No?" Using his other hand, Wormtail withdrew his wand from his pocket. "Hmmm... maybe you need a little extra persuasion."

She swiped at him, making him drop her with a squeal of outrage as he pressed his hand to the bloody gashes she'd scored across his cheek. "You..." he sputtered. "You... how dare..."

Not waiting for him to finish, she raced across the room and up the stairs, determined to reach the sanctuary of Severus's bedroom. She was only a few feet from the threshold when it happened, her world shattering upon a shrill scream.

"*Crucio!*"

All her nerve endings caught fire as she collapsed, twitching violently, not recognizing the howling cries that reverberated up and down the hall as her own. The only thing she knew

was pain, blinding, ceaseless... unable to think... unable to move...

Even when Wormtail lifted the curse, she could do nothing but lie there, her heavy panting mingled with soft mewling noises she hadn't known she had the ability to make. Weakly, she tried to push herself to her feet, cringing away from the sound of his malevolent laughter.

The second spell was painless, at least, being as it was the same charm Severus and Sirius had used in a futile attempt to make her shift back into human form. Wormtail's spell was no less powerful than theirs had been, a flash of brilliant blue light illuminating the darkened hallway like a summer day. But of course, it accomplished nothing. Wormtail stared down at her in bemusement before making another attempt.

And then his beady eyes lit up. "Aha! Set some sort of protective charm on you, did he? I should've expected as much. Clever Severus... but not too clever for me, oh no. Now, I'm going to give you one more chance to reveal yourself. Do it by the count of ten, or I'll make you sorry. Very, very sorry."

Lily lunged for the bedroom, her battered nerves screaming with every step. But Wormtail, no doubt having anticipated her intention, cried, "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Down she went, as stiff as a board, hitting the floor with a resounding thud. Now she was truly helpless, terrified beyond belief... until she saw a flicker of movement in her peripheral vision. Just a little closer now... closer... summoning up the last of her strength, Lily was on the brink of projecting herself at the moth when she heard the front door fly open with a bang.

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The first thing Severus saw was the overturned table next to his armchair, books scattered across the floor. Swearing under his breath, he took the stairs two at a time, whipping around the corner and pointing his wand in one smooth motion.

"*Incarcerous!*"

He watched without a shred of emotion as Wormtail went down, clawing at the snake like bindings that coiled around him from head to toe. The spell had been a defensive measure, nothing more. But as soon as he saw the cat lying there helpless, clearly the victim of an Unforgivable and god knew what else, everything changed.

"*Crucio!*" he snarled, watching with grim pleasure as Wormtail writhed in agony.

"M-m-mercy!"

"*CRUCIO!*"

He lost himself then, driven to fury by the current situation, and then teetering on the brink of madness as he thought of all the atrocities this disgusting vermin had committed for the better part of two decades. Lily sold out to the enemy... not due to a terrible mistake like Severus himself had made, but knowingly, willingly... Lily, all he'd ever known of innocence and beauty, left to suffer and die, and for what? Because this, this... Severus couldn't think of anything foul enough to call him.

"No... no..."

Wormtail curled himself into a ball, his body heaving with pathetic sobs. Severus felt no pity for him. No, he *reveled* in his suffering, drunk on his long-awaited vengeance. He cast a third curse, swiftly followed by a fourth, always, always seeing her face in his mind... that face that haunted his dreams, the one he loved beyond all reason and hadn't had the chance to look upon in nearly twenty years.

Yes, the miserable coward should pay for what he'd done, though not even the most vicious curse could make up for the life that had been stolen from her. Deprived of her home, her family, isolated from human contact beyond anything even Severus could imagine. How much pain might she have been spared, if not for Wormtail?

Indeed, how many other innocent lives had been lost thanks to his treachery?

With that thought, images of Potter and Black flickered through his mind. Severus had no love lost for either of them, but it was impossible for even him to believe they'd deserved their respective fates. One left to rot in prison, the other dead... betrayed by a friend whom they'd defended without question? No, he couldn't see any justice in that, no matter how much he still despised them.

Sneering at the irony, he threw a final curse on their behalf, though this one was much more restrained than the others. And then finally, his fury was spent, gone as quickly as it had appeared.

Wormtail was a mess. He was incoherent now, his body spasming, whimpering in helpless anguish as he bled profusely from several deep slashes on his chest and arms. That was unnerving — although Severus had thought himself under control, had had no intention of actually *killing* the vermin, he couldn't remember having cast that particular curse. Oh well... nothing to do now but repair the damage he'd done. But first...

"Stay here," he said, his voice harsh and slightly breathless from his exertions. Not that the command was necessary — Wormtail could've hardly moved at that point, even if he'd wanted to.

Severus picked up the cat, brutality giving way to extreme gentleness as he cradled her against his chest. He carried her into the bedroom and set her on the bed, his voice soft and soothing as he said, "Are you all right?" It was a stupid question... especially since he forgot to remove the Petrificus charm before he asked it. But once he did so, she nodded, looking far better than she had a few minutes before, though still a bit shaken.

"Does he know?" he said, his voice low and filled with intensity as he laid the parchment in front of her. "Does he know who you are?"

She reached out, her paw still trembling slightly as she placed it over his scrawling of, "I'm not sure."

Severus let out a shuddering sigh. "Well, don't worry. I'll take care of it. Will you be all right for now? Good. Stay here then, and get some rest. I'll be back as soon as I can."

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*"Legilimens!"*

Wormtail's mind, weakened and drained, was even easier to invade than usual. Severus was able to access the events of that evening immediately, seeing the hole that had been chewed through his bedroom wall. He saw Lily, believing she was safe, carefully spelling out a message for him, her green cat's eyes going wide with fear as she realized she was no longer alone.

And then he cringed at her error in judgment, no doubt motivated by sheer panic. If she'd stayed where she was, Wormtail would've been powerless. He couldn't have transformed or cast any spells, couldn't have even set foot on the bedroom floor thanks to the numerous wards Severus had in place. Granted, he hadn't anticipated that the rat would chew his way through, but even that would've been noticed and easily dealt with if the Dark Lord hadn't summoned him at the worst possible moment.

It was extremely difficult not to start cursing Wormtail all over again when he saw what had been done to Lily. But alas, this was the time for restraint. If he had any hope of protecting her, it would require much more subtle means.

And so with a great deal of reluctance, he patched the rodent up, then set to work on modifying his memories. A couple of well-placed Obliviates took care of most of it, erasing any suspicions on Wormtail's part that he'd been dealing with anything other than an ordinary house cat. But of course, that wasn't enough. The Dark Lord was a highly skilled Legilimens... he'd notice the blank spaces and lapses in memory where others would not. And so Severus created new memories, weaving them through Wormtail's consciousness like an intricate tapestry, satisfied by the end of it all that his efforts were virtually seamless.

One thing he did not touch, however, were the memories of the curses he'd inflicted. First, it would have been pointless to do so — the physical evidence would be detectable for weeks, despite the healing spells he'd cast. More importantly though, he didn't want Wormtail to forget just how vicious he could be when crossed.

Well, a few curses were hardly any cause for concern. On the contrary, Severus was fairly certain he could use what he'd done to his advantage.

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"Yes, Wormtail?" the Dark Lord said, his high, reedy voice laced with impatience. "What is your complaint?"

"Him!" Wormtail responded, jabbing a fat finger in Severus's direction. "Snape! He... he *assaulted* me, my lord! Started cursing me and he just wouldn't stop! I thought I was going to die!"

"Indeed? And what did you do to provoke him?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all. I swear it."

The Dark Lord glanced at Severus, appearing almost amused before he shifted his attention back to Wormtail. "Well, let's have a look then, shall we? Step forward, Wormtail. Come on, I haven't got all night. *Legilimens!*"

Severus tensed, despite his conviction that he'd left no flaw in his wake, not even a scrap of information that could be used against him. The examination seemed to go on forever, until



at last, the Dark Lord withdrew, his shrill laughter echoing throughout the cavernous room.

“Nothing at all? I would hardly call it that.” He paused, reaching out to stroke Nagini’s massive head. “Really, Wormtail, you should know better than to mess with a man’s familiar. We tend to be rather... *possessive* of the creatures we keep company with. A powerful lesson learned, I’d say, and no more than you deserved.”

“But my lord...”

“Enough! We have more important matters to attend to.”

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Severus returned later that night, looking exhausted yet smug.

“It’s all right,” he said. “He’s gone. It seems I have the advantage in being indispensable to the Dark Lord’s plans, while Wormtail is a nuisance at best. As such, it has been decided that he’ll be relieved of his duties as my assistant. The Dark Lord wishes me to have as few distractions as possible during such a crucial time, however trivial those distractions might be.”

Relieved, Lily nodded. She’d spent the past few hours crawling the walls with anxiety, convinced that Wormtail would pass his suspicions along to Voldemort and that Severus would bear the brunt of his displeasure. But it seemed that once again, she’d underestimated him. Whatever he’d done had not only protected her identity, but had the added benefit of removing any threat of her being exposed in the near future.

“And you?” Severus said after a moment. “Are you doing better? You certainly look like it.”

As much to prove a point as to spell out the message itself, Lily hopped lightly to the floor, rearranging the letters to read, FINE NOW.

He flashed her a tired smile. “Good. Let’s get some sleep then, shall we?”

When he slipped into bed, she cuddled up to him as she always did, pressed close against his side. His fingers dropped down to stroke her back, soothing, gentle, a nightly routine that was beginning to spoil her. Of course, there was nothing remotely sexual about his attentions — how could there be under the circumstances? Perhaps he was lucky in that, spared from any human attributes that might inspire arousal.

It wasn’t so easy for Lily. Despite what she looked like on the outside, she had the mind, the soul, the sensory perceptions of a woman in her prime. And though there was a great deal of comfort in sharing Severus’s bed, it was equal parts torture on nights like this. She’d breathe in the smell of his skin, a hint of rare herbs and old books, mingled with a clean, musky scent that was his alone. His warmth, the texture of his flesh... she’d close her eyes, unable to stop herself from imagining what the friction between their bodies would feel like as they moved together in the darkness.

And his hands... dear god, his hands. His touch might be restrained for now, platonic because it had to be. But that didn’t stop her from noticing how nimble his fingers were, fantasizing about what they would feel like as they glided across her naked skin. Caressing her breasts, parting her thighs...

“Lily?”

With a jolt followed by a twinge of guilt, she came back to reality. She hadn’t even realized he was still awake, but there he was... propped up on one elbow, a glint of moonlight dancing across the surface of eyes that were dark as sin.

“What happened tonight... I’m sorry. I should’ve been more careful. I should’ve known he’d try something like that.”

The last of her primal urges melted away, replaced by a rush of tenderness. Poor Severus. It was both a flaw and a virtue that he had such high expectations of himself. He had a difficult time accepting that some things were beyond his control. The fact that he’d set things right, had even improved her situation in the aftermath, was but a minor footnote compared with the knowledge that it had happened in the first place.

Of course, she couldn’t say any of this to him. The best she could do was creep up the bed, nuzzling his cheek, smiling on the inside as he let out a low chuckle.

“Well, I suppose that means I’m forgiven.”

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Although Severus dreaded the upcoming school year, he at least had the consolation of finally getting to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. It wasn’t that he preferred the subject over Potions, necessarily, but he’d always felt that his abilities would be put to far better use on practical training for the impending war. It was difficult to see the point of teaching children how to make shrinking potions and treatments for boils when they’d soon be fighting for their lives.

He arrived at Hogwarts the day before term started, settling himself and Lily into his private quarters before tackling the mountain of tedious paperwork that was required each year. Tedious, yes, but also soothing. There was comfort to be found in the expected, no matter how boring the “expected” might be.

Of course, this respite couldn’t last. Severus knew he was in for a challenging year, and indeed, the students had barely arrived on the train when he was faced with his first dilemma. Potter, of course. It always had to be Potter.

Nymphadora’s Patronus, not finding Hagrid in residence, came straight to him. Naturally, he’d heard rumors about the change, the result of her growing feelings for Lupin. He hadn’t wanted to believe it... Nymphadora had always been a decent sort, for all that putting her anywhere near a cauldron was bound to end in disaster. She was far too good for Lupin at any rate, a conclusion that made him scowl as he observed the wolf.

Soon enough, he was at the gates with a lantern clutched in one hand, his features fixed in a contemptuous sneer. He knew what had happened — Draco had been gloating rather loudly as he’d passed the Slytherin table. He’d had to resist the impulse to smack him upside the head... if not for the act itself, then at least for his lack of discretion.

But of course, he couldn’t do that. He was supposed to play favorites, which wasn’t difficult when he lifted the lantern to find Potter staring back at him, looking uncannily like his father with his features twisted in an expression of pure hatred. His enmity was even

worse than the previous years, though that hardly came as a surprise. Dumbledore had alerted Severus to the fact that Potter blamed him for Sirius's death. As if he'd been the one to cast the fatal curse... like he hadn't done everything in his power to prevent the man from attending the battle at all.

Feeling a familiar resentment building inside him, his biting remarks came effortlessly.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think. And let me see, another twenty for your Muggle attire. You know, I don't believe any House has ever been in negative figures this early in the term..."

The boy was seething now. Every muscle in his scrawny body was rigid with tension, daring Severus to proceed. No respect for authority, no acknowledgment of the privilege he received from others and indeed, from Severus himself. After all, he could've done far worse than deduct a few points, which Dumbledore and McGonagall would see replaced by the end of the week.

"I suppose you wanted to make an entrance, did you?" he goaded the boy, unable to help himself. "And with no flying car available, you decided that bursting into the Great Hall halfway through the feast ought to create a dramatic effect."

One word... a single word, and Potter would be in detention for a month.

But the boy said nothing. Severus couldn't decide if that was a disappointment or a relief.

## 27. Fly on the Wall

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### Chapter 27: Fly on the Wall

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Being back at Hogwarts gave Severus access to a wider range of supplies and equipment, in addition to a library that was far more extensive than his own. Unfortunately, finding time to take advantage of those resources was another matter entirely. Between teaching and all his other duties, he was on his feet from dawn until well after midnight, barely able to grab a quick meal or a brief rest before he was off again. Spending hours on personal experiments? That was out of the question, at least for the time being.

Perhaps it was a blessing that his hectic schedule didn't leave him time to brood on that too much.

Meanwhile, his Defense classes were going well. Potter was as obnoxious as ever, but even Severus had to admit that the boy was fairly adept in the subject. Of course, that didn't stop him from insisting that he was mediocre on the best of days, seizing any opportunity to take him down a peg. But his sneering insults served a useful purpose, too. They made Potter try harder, channeling his wounded pride into positive results. He was getting stronger, learning to fight with deadly intent... skills that might very well save his life by the end of it all.

Yes, improvement was to be expected in that area. Potions? Not so much.

Indeed, Severus had been taken aback when he'd heard that the boy was flourishing under Slughorn's instruction. Having been taught by the man himself, he knew him to be a teacher of no exceptional skill, just as he'd spent the last five years learning that Potter had no particular talent in the subject. Perhaps Slughorn was dazzled by his newest "celebrity", taking it upon himself to exaggerate his accomplishments in the hope of future favors?

Yes, that had to be it. If not, the truth would come out sooner or later.

For now, he was more worried about Draco, who was becoming increasingly reckless in his attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord's request. This most recent scheme... if Severus hadn't been on hand to provide the antidote, Katie Bell would've been dead within hours. He needed to find a way to intervene and soon. Otherwise, students would start dropping like flies.

It would've been nice to have a little help from Dumbledore in these matters, but of course, Severus knew better than to hope for that. The headmaster was rarely available these days, either off on one of his mysterious journeys or locked up in his office with Potter. As to the nature of these meetings, Dumbledore was even more reticent than usual.

"Nothing to concern yourself over, Severus. Keep an eye on Mr. Malfoy, yes? I assure you that neither Harry or myself intend on poisoning anyone in the foreseeable future."

Nothing to *concern* himself over? Oh no, of course not! He'd only sworn to protect the boy, a cause to which he'd devoted his life for the past sixteen years. Why should he care about details that might be instrumental in helping him fulfill his promise?

His only consolation was that even Dumbledore no longer had the power to shut him out. Not completely. Making herself undetectable, Lily had begun attending these meetings, spelling out a handful of short messages which led Severus to the conclusion that Dumbledore was sharing information about the Dark Lord's origins. But why?

That question, which seemed like the most crucial of all, still had no answer.

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When Severus informed Lily that he was leaving for Slughorn's party, she sighed inwardly, wishing she had the power to stop him. He'd been grumbling about it for weeks, responding to her "WHY GO" by saying that he had no choice in the matter.

Yes, he went because he felt it was his duty. She admired him for that, but it also made her furious. *Everything* was his responsibility these days, the burdens of a dozen people falling on a single set of shoulders that seemed much too frail to carry them all.

What should've been a metaphorical image had become far too literal for her liking. He'd lost a great deal of weight since the beginning of the school year, natural thinness giving way to a physique that could only be described as gaunt. He hardly seemed to eat anymore, surviving on willpower combined with excessive amounts of strong black coffee. It was no wonder he was so temperamental, especially since he only slept a couple hours each night.

No, she didn't like it at all... the smudges under his eyes that grew darker by the day, standing out in sharp relief against a face that was much too pale and forever lined with worry. She hated it even more because he never complained. Oh, he'd gripe about the students, didn't hesitate to make cutting remarks about other professors he didn't particularly care for.

But did he ever bring attention to his personal needs? Did he ever complain that he was tired or hungry, ever so much as mention that he was in pain? She'd seen him pressing his palm to his forehead on numerous occasions, understood the rigid set of his shoulders that meant they were aching with tension. She heard his long-suffering groans when he heaved himself out of bed each morning, watched over him through countless nights of fitful slumber.

Still, he said nothing.

She wanted to believe that this was just typical Slytherin stubbornness... vulnerability equals weakness and all that nonsense. But deep down, she knew it was more than that. She had a feeling that he still believed whatever he suffered was no more than he deserved.

Unfortunately, she was in no position to show him otherwise. She could spell out messages, begging him to eat or sleep, which she was happy to do whenever she could get away with it. But she couldn't take care of him the way she wanted to, couldn't use her own eyes, her voice, her touch, to give him comfort.

Still, he obviously found solace in her clumsy feline affections, even if she saw them as a poor substitute for human tenderness. She might not be capable of a lot of things, but she was here to listen, to care, to worry over him incessantly, which was a hell of a lot more than she could say for any of the humans he encountered on a daily basis.

And maybe after all, that was what he needed most. Just someone to *be here*, to know that he wasn't alone.

That much was easy to accomplish, being as she spent most of her time in his quarters these days. She attended Harry's meetings with Dumbledore, sometimes watching him at Quidditch practice when Severus was otherwise occupied. But she never visited Gryffindor tower anymore, always coming straight back to the dungeons.

She still enjoyed spending time around her son. But now that he was older, it seemed intrusive to become too involved in his personal life without his knowledge. Eavesdropping on conversations between him and his friends would be bad enough, but what if she stumbled across him in the midst of some private moment? Having attended Hogwarts herself, she knew which places to steer clear of, starting with the Gryffindor common room.

The one place she *didn't* avoid was the headmaster's office. Anything having to do with Voldemort was definitely her concern, especially while Dumbledore was attempting to use her 16-year-old child as his primary weapon. Oh, he could play the genial old man better than anyone, but beneath that, there was something cold and calculating, a determination to win no matter the cost. And if he couldn't be bothered to protect Severus, a man who'd served him faithfully for so many years, how could she trust him with Harry's safety?

She couldn't. It was as simple as that.

Fortunately, Harry wouldn't be meeting with Dumbledore tonight. He'd be at Slughorn's party, which she spontaneously decided to attend. Why not?

A moth? Yes, that would work.

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Slughorn was in fine form, ingratiating to the students that might prove useful someday, while ignoring those who didn't measure up to his standards. Why had she ever agreed to be a member of his repulsive Slug Club? It was hard to imagine she'd ever enjoyed these events, blind to all the students who'd been alienated in the process.

Every year she returned to Hogwarts, there was another illusion waiting to be shattered. One by one, they fell from grace... Dumbledore, the man she'd idolized. Slughorn, who'd earned her complacency through excessive praise of her abilities. Even McGonagall seemed tarnished now that Lily realized how much she favored her own Gryffindors, barely noticing all the other students who were demoralized in the process.

Severus was guilty of preferential treatment, too, but that hardly seemed like the same thing. Slytherins had the odds stacked against them from the start, forced to fight upstream for every ounce of respect they hoped to gain. No Gryffindor was viewed with suspicion, treated with derision and scorn, simply because they happened to be a Gryffindor. Nor was that true for the other two houses. And of course, Severus had experienced that himself in his younger

years... how many times had she been forced to defend him simply because he was a Slytherin?

And here was an even more disturbing question: would James and Sirius have gone out of their way to torment Severus if he'd belonged to another house? Try as she might, she couldn't imagine them bullying a socially awkward Hufflepuff... or even a Ravenclaw whose extensive reading involved a bit of exploration of the Dark Arts.

Yes, Severus would know how much it hurt to have people believe the worst of him based on nothing more than the color of his tie. Doing whatever he could to prevent his Slytherins from feeling that way was certainly understandable, even if he took it a little far at times. At least students from the other houses had plenty of allies to balance things out. The Slytherins had no one.

Ironically, it was upon this realization that she spotted Draco. Filch had him by the ear, dragging him along with an air of barely suppressed triumph. She wasn't close enough to hear the conversation, but it was clear that Draco had been caught doing something wrong. Severus took control of the situation, wasting no time in escorting him out of the room.

Without a second thought, Lily followed.

She was alarmed when she noticed that Harry was right behind her, peering cautiously up and down the empty corridor before ducking beneath his Invisibility Cloak. And then she saw nothing, though her hearing was so acute that she had no trouble tracking his progress as he crept down the hall. He finally came to a standstill, letting out a soft gasp as Draco's voice floated out into the hallway, low pitched and filled with tension.

"For the last time, I didn't do it, okay? That Bell girl must've had an enemy no one knows about — don't look at me like that! I know what you're doing, I'm not stupid, but it won't work. I can stop you!"

"Ah... Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?"

Lily wished there was something she could do to get Harry away from that door. She heard his breath coming faster, sensed his excitement as his suspicions were confirmed. That part of it was fine. Draco had been making a mess of things, to the point where the truth would've come out sooner or later. But this conversation was threatening to lead to worse conclusions, since Severus would need to convince Draco that he was on his side.

"If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you..."

Draco wasn't having it, which was hardly surprising. He'd been giving Severus the cold shoulder for months, seeming to blame him for rising in Voldemort's favor even as his own father had fallen into disgrace.

"What does it matter?" Draco said a few minutes later. "Defense against the Dark Arts — it's all just a joke, isn't it? An act? Like any of us need protecting against the Dark Arts..."

"It is an act that is crucial to success, Draco!" Severus spat back, sounding increasingly frustrated. "Where do you think I would've been all these years if I had not known how to act? Now listen to me..."

Lily didn't need to hear the rest. She was focused on Harry's breathing now... ragged, caught between excitement and panic. He thought he'd uncovered the truth, which would lead to him despising Severus more than he already did, if that were possible. And what would happen then? Where would he be if, as she suspected, he found himself having to rely on the man he hated by the end of it all?

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Severus made it back to his quarters, doing his best not to stagger along the way. Not because he'd consumed too much firewhiskey (though admittedly, he had). No, he couldn't blame his condition on anything but exhaustion, wishing for nothing more than to fall in bed and sleep for a week.

Instead, he collapsed in his armchair, closing his eyes and then forcing them back open as he realized Lily was spelling out a message on the floor.

#### HARRY KNOWS

"Knows what? Oh, don't tell me... he eavesdropped on my conversation with Draco?"

She bobbed her head and he felt a surge of anger, followed by helpless frustration. Stupid boy... always poking his nose in where it didn't belong. But of course, he could say nothing, couldn't even punish Potter for this particular transgression.

"What does it matter?" he said tiredly. "So I'm a fucking Death Eater. I'm sure he's thought so all along. He's probably thrilled to finally have his suspicions confirmed. And when I fulfill my vow, everyone else will think the same."

She spelled out another message, carefully pushing the letters into place before coming to sit at his feet.

#### NOT ME

Unable to help himself, he smiled at that. "No, Lily. Not you."

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Severus elected to remain at Hogwarts during the winter holidays, hoping to take full advantage of his free time. No classes to teach, no Potter or Draco to worry about... it was the first chance he'd had in months to focus all his attention on research.

In the end, he'd decided to work on three separate theories. One was based on the small amount of decipherable information he'd found in the journal, while the others were purely of his own invention. The fortunate thing about magic was that many elements were fairly versatile — granted, most spells were associated with a single, well known counterspell, but that was based on practicality rather than limitation. Why waste time searching for an alternate solution if it wasn't needed in the first place?

Of course, the counterspell for *Ligatis Animalia* was bound to be complicated, as was the case with the majority of charms related to life force and the soul. But he had a wealth of knowledge to draw upon, helped by a storeroom full of restorative ingredients. And while it



would be a few months yet before they were ready (hopefully not too late), he'd have a full crop of mature mandrakes to work with thanks to Professor Sprout.

Time... time was what he needed more than anything, and it was swiftly running out. No doubt his first two solutions, both potions of a highly complex nature, would involve quite a bit of tweaking and adjustment. He wouldn't even be willing to test them on her unless he could be absolutely certain they would do no harm.

The third solution was different, as it would contain just a handful of ingredients. Unfortunately, it was also the one that Severus was most reluctant to try, since it was a modified version of the Regeneration Potion that had restored the Dark Lord to his corporeal body. Naturally, the original potion was Dark magic, which was out of the question. But perhaps that could be circumvented by involving willing participants rather than taking what he needed by force. That was the essential difference between Dark magic and Blood magic.

Bone of the father  
Flesh of a servant  
Blood from a foe

Severus's flesh and blood could be used for part of the potion. No question of willingness as far as that was concerned. But the genetic link wouldn't be so easy to acquire. He could hardly dig up her parents's graves... even if Lily would've permitted such a thing, it was impossible for the deceased to give their consent.

Blood from a relative might prove a worthy substitute, but what was he supposed to do? March up to Potter brandishing a knife, claiming he needed his life force for some unknown purpose? Right. The boy's horrified refusal would be the least of his problems once Dumbledore found out that he'd attempted such a thing.

His only other option was Petunia, which was tantamount to saying he had no options at all.

Still, he was hopeful, having been able to put together several variations of ingredient lists for the first two potions. Both would require time to mature — a full moon cycle in the case of one, which was a heavily modified version of Polyjuice. The other couldn't be produced until close to the end of term, being as it relied upon mandrake as a key ingredient. But progress was progress.

By the time the students returned, he'd finished everything he'd set out to accomplish during the break. Nothing to do now but wait.

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## HORCRUX

"Horcrux?" Severus frowned down at Lily, who'd just returned from spying on yet another meeting between Potter and Dumbledore. "Sounds vaguely familiar, but I'm not sure where... does that have something to do with the Dark Lord's return? How he survived?"

She bobbed her head, looking anxious. More than ever, he wished her communication skills weren't so limited. It was neither safe or practical for her to spell out anything but the briefest messages, and she only had so many letters she could work with. That left Severus

with no choice but to play guessing games... easier said than done when dealing with such a complex issue.

“And Dumbledore imparted this information because... does this have anything to do with how the Dark Lord might be defeated?”

Another nod.

“I see. So the macabre trips down memory lane were just... were those even necessary?” She stared at him, clearly becoming frustrated, before spelling out another response.

MAYBE

Sighing heavily, Severus sank back in his armchair. He hated having to do this to her, felt like anything but the most simple communications only served to remind her of her limitations. She tried to hide it, of course, but even in animal form, Lily wasn't exactly skilled at concealing her emotions. Her inability to speak, especially when she had something important to say, obviously made her miserable.

“Well, I'll attempt to speak with the headmaster again as soon as I have the chance. In the meantime, I'm certain I've heard of this Horcrux somewhere. Perhaps...” And then he trailed off, his eyes growing wide.

Oh yes, he remembered it now. How old had he been? 15? 16? He'd been home for the summer, fluctuating between boredom and deep depression since Lily had written him off. A bit of poking around in the basement at Spinner's End had led to his discovery of a small metal crate, locked tight and heavily warded to boot.

At the time, he'd barely considered what might be inside. The wards themselves had been appealing enough, offering a perfect opportunity to challenge his magical abilities. But when he'd finally broken through, he'd understood why his mother had kept these particular books locked away, as opposed to the ordinary tomes of Dark magic she'd given him herself. These were something else entirely... Darker and far more sinister.

Of course, Severus had read them immediately, even though he'd been unnerved by the contents. Ritual sacrifice. Spells for torture beyond anything he'd ever seen. And worst of all, something called a Horcrux... the act of tearing a soul asunder as a means of achieving immortality. The caster would be broken, damaged beyond belief, but they would live.

“I know what a Horcrux is,” he said quietly, coming back to the present. “I remember now. So that's what the Dark Lord has done? Split his soul in two? Well, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.”

SIX

For several long moments, all he could do was stare down at the letters, unwilling to believe what she was trying to tell him. Split six ways... was that even possible? One would hardly be *human*, certainly not sane.

But then again, Severus supposed the Dark Lord was neither of those things.

In the end, Severus had to wait nearly two months for the opportunity to speak with Dumbledore alone. The headmaster had made an art form out of avoiding him, always full of convenient excuses as to why he didn't have time to speak with his master spy.

By the time he got around to arranging a meeting, Severus was thoroughly fed up. He'd had plenty of time to think about this business with the Horcruxes, and with help from Lily, had long since come to the conclusion that Dumbledore was sharing memories of the Dark Lord's past in an effort to figure out where the latter might have hidden them. It seemed that was the master plan — find and destroy them all. The ring and the diary were already gone... four remained, and Dumbledore had at least *some* idea as to what those objects might be.

So why had he waited so long to reveal this information? And why hadn't he bothered to mention it to Severus at all? They could've started this years ago, could've wiped out the Dark Lord for good before he'd ever had the chance to return.

Of course, it was entirely possible that Dumbledore was just finding this out for himself, but he'd at least known since the previous summer when he'd hunted down that ring. So why the inaction? Why devote all his time to relating this to a teenage boy rather than include the entire Order in the hunt? Why not recruit Severus himself, who had a better chance than anyone of gathering inside information?

By the time Dumbledore met him for their "twilight stroll", a suggestion he'd made with twinkling eyes, Severus was furious. He couldn't say anything about the Horcruxes, of course, but he shouldn't have had to snoop around to find out about them in the first place.

"Ah, good evening, Severus! I hope you don't mind meeting out of doors, but I do love this time of year. And since it's the last time I'll ever..."

"What are you doing with Potter, all these evenings you are closeted together?" He wouldn't have interrupted, but he didn't think he could endure any idle chitchat at the moment.

"Why? You aren't trying to give him more detentions, Severus? The boy will soon have spent more time in detention than out."

Typical. As if Potter hadn't deserved every one of those punishments? Well, most of them, at any rate.

"He is his father all over again..."

Severus ignored the first part of the headmaster's response. It was an insult to Lily to suggest that she and the boy were anything alike. As for the rest of it... "Things to discuss before it's too late"? Was that all he was going to get?

"Information," he repeated. "You trust him... you do not trust me."

"It is not a question of trust. I have, as we both know, limited time. It is essential that I give the boy enough information for him to do what he needs to do."

"And why may I not have the same information?"

The rest of the conversation was so infuriating that Severus wouldn't be able to process it all until he'd had a chance to calm down. He'd spent the better part of two decades in this man's service, doing whatever was asked of him no matter how repugnant or even life-

threatening it might be. When had he ever failed him? Not once. When had he ever exposed, even to the smallest degree, information that the Dark Lord wasn't supposed to have? And to be patronized this way, to be told that he was being left in the dark because it was a potential risk for him to know too much? To know the things that might help him save the boy's *life*?

Of all the insults Dumbledore had ever dealt him, this was the worst. Granted, he already knew more than the old man assumed, but that was precious little compared with what *should* have been shared with him freely.

"After you have killed me, Severus..."

Well no, there were worse things than lack of trust, however undeserved. To imagine that on top of everything else, he was expected to kill this man, an action that would condemn him in the eyes of the entire Wizarding world. But of course, Dumbledore didn't care about the repercussions, did he? As long as he got what he wanted...

"You refuse to tell me everything, yet you expect that small service of me! You take a great deal for granted, Dumbledore! Perhaps I have changed my mind!"

But of course, that wasn't possible. If it had been, Severus would've walked away right then and there, whether he'd given his word or not. His promise had been made to Lily, to protect her son, not to act as Dumbledore's puppet. If only he hadn't made that fucking Vow, he could've bided his time, waited for nature to take its course... maybe he could've even come up with a way to save Draco without killing anyone in the process. And once Dumbledore was dead, he could've taken control of Potter himself, could've...

But of course, it was too late for that. His hands were tied.

Dumbledore let out a sigh. "Come to my office tonight, Severus, at eleven, and you shall not complain that I have no confidence in you..."

## 28. Truth and Betrayal

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### Chapter 28: Truth and Betrayal

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Severus hadn't told Lily where he was going. Assuming she already knew far more than he did, he hardly saw the point. Besides, depending on how things went in Dumbledore's office, he didn't want to have to worry about restraining his temper for her sake. And so he went alone, half anticipating, half dreading what was to come...

The truth at last? Or more evasion?

"Sit down, Severus." Dumbledore didn't bother with his usual pleasantries, which in itself, should have been a warning. But of course, nothing could have prepared Severus for the harsh realities he was about to be confronted with.

"I understand that you are frustrated in light of the fact that there are certain things I cannot tell you. No, Severus. Listen to me. Do not think you are being shuffled to the side, unneeded, undervalued. There is one piece of information, the most important of all, that I cannot share with Harry. That task will fall to you."

"What is it?"

Dumbledore paced in a circle, coming to a standstill as he gazed out the darkened window. "Harry must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary. Otherwise, how could he have the strength to do what must be done?"

Unnerved now, Severus said, "But what must he do?"

Dumbledore avoided that question, of course, rambling about Nagini of all things, something about coming to the point where the Dark Lord would fear for the life of his snake. Bewildering, at least until the pieces began to fall into place. The snake was a Horcrux... yes, that was the only plausible explanation. And no doubt Nagini would prove more of a challenge than stabbing a diary or destroying an old cup. It seemed only natural to leave her for last.

"If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection, then I think it will be safe to tell Harry."

Severus frowned. "Tell him what?" Surely there couldn't be any harm in letting the boy know ahead of time that Nagini was one of the Horcruxes. And come to that, if defeating the Dark Lord came down to destroying a bunch of objects and a snake, why was it so crucial that Potter himself had to do it? Because of that stupid prophecy?

"Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole..."

Dumbledore was speaking rapidly now, his voice oddly detached. "Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never understood."

Severus stared at him in growing horror, sensing what was coming while hoping like hell he might be proven wrong. Was Dumbledore saying that the boy himself was a Horcrux? If so, that could only mean...

"While that fragment of soul, unmasked by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die."

"So the boy..." Severus could hardly get the words out. "The boy must die?"

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."

"I thought... all these years... that we were protecting him for her. For Lily."

Was that not what he'd sworn to do, the vow that Dumbledore had accepted? Had he been lied to all these years, his unbearable grief manipulated for the sole purpose of helping Dumbledore defeat his greatest enemy? And what about Potter? Despite all else, he could've sworn that Dumbledore had come to love the boy. How could he stand there and discuss his impending death as if it were nothing more than another part of their strategy?

"We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength. Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth..."

Severus hardly heard the rest. "You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?"

"Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"

There was a cynical edge to the old man's voice, exposing another painful truth... even after all these years, deep down, Severus would always be a Death Eater in Dumbledore's eyes. No redemption here, no opportunity to prove he had changed in truth... not simply because of the vow he'd made.

"Lately, only those whom I could not save," he said quietly. "You have used me."

"Meaning?"

That Dumbledore even had to ask for clarification was another slap in the face. "I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you," Severus snarled. "Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter..."

"But this is touching, Severus. Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"

"For *him*? *Expecto Patronum!*"

Severus found it hard to believe that Dumbledore fully understood the implications, for all that his eyes filled with tears as the doe bounded across the room. He was touched by the sentimentality, of course, the idea of a love that defied death itself. But did he know what it meant? That nothing, *nothing* was more important than honoring that love, even if it meant

letting the entire world burn for the sake of it. Severus's affections for the boy, or lack thereof, had never been the point. To suggest otherwise was insulting.

"After all this time?" Dumbledore said, looking surprised.

"Always."

Without another word, Severus strode out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

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Unable to face Lily, he didn't return to his quarters that night. He roamed the castle until dawn, wondering how in the hell he was supposed to tell her that Dumbledore's grand strategy included the death of her only child. Worse, how could he explain that there was no other way as far as he could see?

As much as he questioned Dumbledore's methods, there was no getting around the fact that he was the greatest wizard alive. If there'd been any chance of saving Potter from his fate, wouldn't he have figured out how to make that happen? Yes, of course... now that his anger had cooled off a bit, Severus had to acknowledge that Dumbledore *did* care about the boy. He had a funny way of showing it, what with conditioning him to be a human sacrifice and all. But surely he would've avoided such a thing if it were possible.

Indeed, from a logical perspective, it wasn't hard to understand. Perhaps Severus could've even accepted it himself if he'd known the truth from the start. Letting the boy live out his childhood, finding some small consolation in knowing that even if his death was inevitable, at least it wouldn't be in vain.

It was the deception that hurt, countless years of working toward an entirely different purpose, guided by the only man he'd thought he could trust. Would he have followed the same course if he'd known what was waiting at the end? He liked to think so... but it would've been nice to have made that choice for himself.

Now? Unfortunately, nothing had changed. Other than a loss of respect and a great deal of pain, he had no choice but to get on with it and do what he'd promised to do. Give the boy a chance to win, at least, if not to survive this war as had been his original intention.

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If Severus thought being harsh with Potter would prove difficult now, he was soon disabused of that notion. In class, the boy was as obnoxious as ever, glaring at him defiantly and challenging him whenever he could get away with it. Severus responded in kind, oddly comforted by the familiarity of their mutual dislike. It was easier to deal with than the twinges of sympathy that crept into his consciousness now and again, far preferable to his constant guilt over not telling Lily the truth.

But then Potter did something that ignited his fury beyond all reason, hearkening back to the viciousness of his godfather in his younger years. Severus had known for weeks that Draco had been shutting himself up in the bathroom to cry. He hadn't interfered directly, but he'd done what he could by keeping other students away from that corridor whenever he could spare the time to do so.

Unfortunately, he'd been patrolling another area of the castle when the screams had started.

*"Murder! Murder in the bathroom! Murder!"*

The ghost might've been exaggerating, but the scene was indeed a bloodbath... grisly enough on its own without a sickening realization. Severus recognized the spell instantly, knew there was only one place it could've come from. Which would also mean...

But there was no time to think about that just yet. Severus dropped to his knees beside Draco, tracing his wand across the wounds as he chanted under his breath, all while hating himself for ever having invented the fucking spell in the first place. As if this boy hadn't suffered enough, condemned not just by the Dark Lord himself, but by the circumstances under which he'd been born. Child of a Death Eater, heir to prejudices that went back hundreds of years. It was clear that, as was often the case these days, he'd been crying. The tears were still wet on his cheeks.

Was that what had happened then? Had Potter followed him in here to gloat? That seemed to be the case. And when Draco had attempted to defend himself, Potter had hit him with one of the most savage curses in existence. Oh yes, it was a familiar scene... uncomfortably so.

Not that Severus couldn't tell the difference. Potter looked genuinely astonished at what he'd done, where Black would've acted knowingly and with a great deal of enthusiasm. But did ignorance make it excusable? No. Who in their right mind would use a spell labeled "FOR ENEMIES" without knowing what it did or if the effects could be reversed? The intention itself had been malicious, even if the results had been a little more extreme than anticipated.

Severus helped Draco to his feet, urging him to throw an arm over his shoulders for support. Perhaps it was a good thing that Draco needed someone to escort him to the hospital wing... he couldn't trust himself to deal with Potter until he'd had a few minutes to calm down.

"And you, Potter... you wait here for me."

He was back in ten minutes, still furious, but at least more composed. A touch of Legilimency to confirm his suspicions... yes, there it was. He would've known that book anywhere. And still, the boy had the audacity to look him straight in the eye while pretending to know nothing about it, and then to switch it out when asked to retrieve the bloody thing.

Well, if he was determined to serve detention for the rest of the term, who was Severus to stop him?

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Lily couldn't shake the feeling that Severus was hiding something.

He'd been distant these past couple months, often disappearing at night and not confiding in her the way he'd done before. She hadn't pressed him about it, even through her limited means of communication, telling herself that it probably came down to stress. He didn't have to say anything for her to know that he was growing increasingly worried as time ran out for both him and Draco.



Every time she looked at him, he seemed thinner, the shadows under his eyes even darker than they'd been earlier in the year. Not that anyone could blame him under the circumstances, but now more than ever, he needed to take care of himself. And unfortunately, she still wasn't in a position where she could be much help with that.

They'd tried the first potion to no avail. Once, twice, and then a third time, with minor adjustments to the ingredients. No effect other than a slightly nauseous feeling that had lingered with her for a few hours after he'd dosed her. Trying to mask the disappointment in his eyes, he'd told her that it had been the least likely solution anyway, and that they were bound to have better luck with the mandrake potion he'd be able to prepare in a month or so.

Nothing to do but wait... something that was becoming more difficult as the school year drew to a close. Even in the relative sanctuary of Severus's quarters, she could feel the mounting tension, even if she couldn't pinpoint the source. It made her restless, uneasy... she spent a lot more time these days roaming the halls, hungry for any tidbit of information that would let her know what was going on beyond what she could glean from Severus himself.

That was how she happened across an unusual scene that was taking place on the seventh floor, right next to the Room of Requirement. Harry and that Divination professor... what was her name? Trelawney? Strange woman, and a drunk one, too, by the smell of it. Lily crept closer, hoping neither of them would notice her since she hadn't bothered to change forms.

At first, it seemed like a whole lot of nonsense, which Lily had learned over the years was to be expected from Professor Trelawney. Frankly, she wondered why her son was tolerating it rather than offering excuses and making a hasty exit. But then the woman's entire demeanor changed, becoming much more intent.

"You know what I say to such people, Harry? Would Dumbledore have let me teach at this great school, put so much trust in me all these years, had I not proved myself to him?"

Harry looked as if he didn't quite know how to respond, which was hardly surprising.

"I well remember my first interview with Dumbledore," she went on, her voice low and dramatic, hardly above a whisper. "He was deeply impressed, of course, deeply impressed. I was staying at the Hog's Head, which I do not advise, incidentally..."

Trelawney went on to explain, in a maddeningly drawn out way, that Dumbledore had come to her room to interview her for the position, but they were interrupted by... Severus? Severus had been spying on them? That was certainly what it sounded like, but why?

Harry, too, seemed captivated by this information. More so than she was, in fact... he'd stopped walking, his face as white as a ghost.

"Harry? Harry — I thought we were going to see the headmaster together?"

"You stay here," Harry responded, sounding quite unlike himself.

Trelawney looked perplexed, not that anyone could've blamed her. "But dear... I was going to tell him how I was assaulted in the Room of..."

*"You stay here!"* Harry shouted, taking off at a run.

Grateful for the moths that were ubiquitous around the castle, Lily quickly switched forms and followed in his wake. Something to do with Severus... something that made her son look as if he'd taken a Stunner to the chest. Could it be as bad as all that?

Unceremoniously, Harry burst into the headmaster's office, though Dumbledore didn't seem to notice anything was amiss. He immediately started talking about the Horcruxes, how he believed he'd located another one and wished for Harry to accompany him when he went to confirm his suspicions.

And then finally, he moved away from the window where he'd been standing, taking a closer look at Harry. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing."

"What has upset you?"

"I'm not upset."

"Harry, you were never a good Occlumens..."

With that, Harry exploded,. "*Snape!* Snape's what's happened! He told Voldemort about the prophecy! It was him, he listened outside the door, Trelawney told me!"

No. No, there had to be a mistake. Hadn't Trelawney said something about Severus being there to interview for a teaching position? Maybe...

But then all her hopes were dashed as she saw that Dumbledore had gone pale. "When did you find out about this?" he said softly.

"Just now!" And losing the last of his restraint, Harry began to shout. "And you let him teach here and he told Voldemort to go after my mum and dad!"

For the first time in years, Lily pictured James on that final night... yelling at her to take Harry and get away, promising to hold Voldemort off. And Harry himself, growing up without parents... one in the grave and the other who might as well have been, being as she'd hardly had a chance to be a mother to him throughout most of his childhood.

Severus was responsible for that? If she had the timing right, that had been right before he'd switched sides... but if he'd thought her worthless enough to hand over to Voldemort in the first place, what had made him change his mind? Did it matter? The thought that Severus, even for a second, hadn't cared if she lived or died as long as it pleased his master...

"Harry, please listen to me," Dumbledore said quietly, almost as if he were speaking to them both. "Professor Snape made a terrible..."

"Don't tell me it was a mistake, sir, he was listening at the door!"

"Please let me finish. Professor Snape made a terrible mistake. He was still in Lord Voldemort's employ on the night he heard the first half of Professor Trelawney's prophecy..."

Dumbledore went on to explain that Severus had had no idea who the prophecy was about. He'd acted on Voldemort's behalf, wishing to warn his master of a potential threat to his life. Still disconcerting, but at least Lily could breathe again. No, he'd never intended to hurt *her*... not that faceless strangers would've been excusable either, but she'd long since come to

terms with the darker elements of his past. After all, hadn't he spent the majority of his adult life trying to make up for his mistakes?

And after all, it wasn't as if she was innocent either. She'd abandoned him when he'd needed her most, had known he was vulnerable, and still...

"You have no idea of the remorse professor Snape felt when he realized how Lord Voldemort had interpreted the prophecy, Harry," the headmaster said, his voice gentle. "I believe it to be the greatest regret of his life and the reason that he returned..."

Harry continued with his suspicions, which unfortunately, was only to be expected. He'd been given every reason to think the worst of Severus, couldn't have known just how much the teacher he hated had done on his behalf. Would he ever know the truth? Not from Dumbledore, certainly. Not Severus either, who would have far too much pride to say anything in his own defense, even in a future where it might be safe to do so.

Lily was still discomforted by the way Severus had treated Harry over the years, still not sure how much of it had been part of his cover and how much was real. But as far as the prophecy was concerned, she couldn't hold it against him. Not now, after everything he'd done to make things right. And while she would've rather he hadn't concealed it from her, it was obviously a painful subject... better to leave it for a time when she was more capable of taking part in the discussion.

After a time, Dumbledore changed the subject, reverting back to the Horcrux. Lily was undecided for a moment... should she go with them, find out all she could? Or would it be better to stay where she was and wait for their return?

She chose the latter, simply because the thought of witnessing her son in what sounded like a highly dangerous situation was unbearable. If she'd been human, able to help him, that would have been a different story... but like this? No. It seemed she had no choice but to trust Dumbledore to bring him back safe.

## 29. Necessary Evils

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### Chapter 29: Necessary Evils

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“Whatever happens, stay here. Don’t come out until morning.”

The cat gave Severus an exasperated look, which was easy enough to interpret. She thought he was overreacting, being as she could simply transfer to another animal if necessary. Well, that was irrelevant as far as he was concerned. He wasn’t willing to take any chances.

“Stay here,” he repeated as the noises above increased in intensity. “If I can’t come back for you...”

He was interrupted by a sharp rap on the door.

“If I can’t come back for you,” he said with more urgency. “Find me.”

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Severus had known it would be tonight.

As such, he’d hardly been surprised when Dumbledore had informed him he was going on a secret mission and would be taking Potter along. Nor had it been a shock when Draco disappeared for hours, or when Order members infiltrated the school, swearing up and down that they were just there to provide a little extra security.

Understanding the role he was meant to play, he’d kept to his office, knowing neither of his masters intended him to be in the thick of the battle. Not tonight.

Throughout the afternoon and early evening, he’d waited, doing his best to preserve his strength for the trials to come. Up until tonight, he hadn’t thought about killing Dumbledore in anything but the most abstract terms... hoping, always hoping that by some miracle, he’d be saved from having to do it at all.

But he was beyond salvation now. He’d known that as soon as he’d heard the commotion on the floors above — frantic shouting, curses ricocheting off the walls. Shielding himself, he tried to ignore it, struggled to suppress his fear for the children along with the instinct to rush to their defense. No, he couldn’t do that... had to wait for a signal. It would be too much of a risk to show himself until the last possible moment.

“Stay out of it, Severus. Remain neutral until you have no other choice.”

Had the Dark Lord told him that, or had it been Dumbledore? He hurried to open the door, unnerved that he couldn’t quite remember anymore.

“Come quickly, Severus, come quickly!” Flitwick cried, looking up at him with wide, trusting eyes. “Death Eaters in Hogwarts... never thought I’d see the day!”

*Stupefy.*

The spell was nonverbal and lightning swift. Flitwick would've never known what hit him. Of course, that didn't make Severus feel less guilty for striking down a man who'd been a trusted colleague. His only consolation was that Flitwick would be safe down here... the Death Eaters would've been warned to stay away from the dungeons.

He had no time to wonder why Granger and Lovegood were hanging around outside his office, both jumping in fright as he emerged into the corridor. "Professor Flitwick," he said as he strode past them. "Collapsed. Shock, I think. Stay down here and see to him."

Two more lives that might be saved? He hoped so.

Relieved that the corridors were more or less deserted, he streaked up one flight of steps, followed by a second and a third, wand drawn and ready in case he had to fight his way through. But it was an unnecessary precaution — the Order members were already fully engaged with their Death Eater opponents, neither treating him like a threat on the assumption that he was on their side. Dodging a few poorly aimed hexes, he slipped past them, straight up the stairs, emerging onto the ramparts above.

The scene was much as he'd expected — a handful of Death Eaters, their expressions savage and hungry for blood. And there was Draco, looking more than ever like a frightened child, which of course, was exactly what he was. And Dumbledore... holy fuck, he looked half dead already, slumped against the wall like he didn't have the strength to hold himself upright. They'd tortured him after all then, even though he could've only been up here a matter of minutes before Severus had arrived? No, no time to think about that. No time to care.

And at this moment, he didn't. All he could think about was the pain, the awful futility of the bargain he'd entered into in good faith. Years upon years of manipulation, concealment, outright lies... resentment simmered deep in his chest, threatening to boil over like an overheated cauldron, and in a flash, he knew he could do it, that he was more than capable of the seething hatred required to deliver the curse to full effect.

"Severus..."

But with that broken whisper, he realized this hatred wasn't directed at Dumbledore himself, for all that the headmaster was both a source of his pain and his intended target. No, this enmity ran far deeper than that... hatred for a world where such extreme measures were necessary in the first place. So many souls lost or forever scarred, so much unnecessary suffering, so much potential squandered... and for what?

He no longer saw Dumbledore's face, taut and ashen as the old man prayed for death. No... there were too many others crowding his consciousness now, phantom visages of those who hadn't been half so ready to meet their untimely ends. So much destruction, so much waste... all to satisfy a monster's relentless appetite for cruelty, his insane determination to live forever no matter the cost.

No, Dumbledore shouldn't have to sacrifice his life on Voldemort's behalf, any more than Severus should have to deliver the killing blow. Neither of them were truly responsible for what was about to happen. He couldn't fault Dumbledore, who put a handful of lives on the line in the effort to save countless others. No... Severus couldn't even blame himself, with all

his foolish mistakes and past regrets. Somehow, he'd never understood the underlying truth in his struggle for redemption, his ceaseless determination to pay penance for another man's sins.

Voldemort was at fault here. No one else.

The Dark Lord was the only one who could've prevented this. Maybe Severus wouldn't have been prevailed upon to carry out this awful deed if he'd acted differently, perhaps Dumbledore could have chosen an alternate solution. But the cruelty, the misery, hundreds of innocent lives snuffed out and countless more to follow... all of that had been inevitable from the day the future tyrant had drawn his first breath. Voldemort's world was one of unspeakable injustice, and would remain so unless Severus, Dumbledore, and Potter, did everything in their power to stop it. None of them had asked to be at the forefront, but now that they were, they had no choice but to step forward and accept their fate.

"Severus... please..."

*Stay focused*, the old man's eyes seemed to say. *Remember what it is you're really trying to kill.*

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

---

"Out of here, quickly."

Severus slammed his shields into place, struggling to block out the sickening visual of Dumbledore tumbling over the ramparts, illuminated by a flash of green light. Dumbledore, dead at his hands, features frozen in an expression of gratitude that was somehow more excruciating than abject terror would've been.

No... mustn't think about it. Not that that could be avoided entirely, but at least if he Occluded for all he was worth, it dulled the pain somewhat. *Don't think about it, keep moving... get the boy to safety... remember that you yourself are essential... only you can protect them now...*

As he herded Draco back into the stairwell, he caught a glimpse of Potter. The boy's expression was full of shock, utter revulsion, but for the first time, it stirred no similar sentiments in Severus. All he could do was lift the spell that was holding Potter captive, vaguely hoping that he wouldn't get himself killed with all the Death Eaters crawling the halls.

"It's over, time to go!" he bellowed, hoping to put an end to the bloodshed before any further damage was done. "Out now, out! All of you!"

His own path was unobstructed, since it was too soon for the Order to know what he'd done. He escorted Draco out of the castle, eyes straight ahead, ignoring the destruction he encountered along the way. *Save Draco... save yourself...*

"Get back to your tower," he snarled at a group of terrified Ravenclaws, moments before he blew the front doors wide open with a resounding bang.

"Come, Draco. Faster now..."

Severus had anticipated Potter's pursuit, hardly surprised when a shout of "*Stupefy*" rang out behind him followed by a jet of red light that missed him by a mile. Well, as much as he'd hoped to avoid this particular confrontation, perhaps it was a good thing. It gave him an excuse to provide at least some manner of protection until the other Death Eaters had departed.

"Run, Draco!" he shouted, even as he stopped in his tracks.

Turning to face Potter, he was taken aback by the boy's expression, wild eyed and twisted in fury. This, too, should have been expected, but in the hellish glow of Hagrid's burning cabin, he looked almost demonic, every bit as savage as the Death Eaters who were closing in behind him. Such was the power of hatred... or perhaps, the power of love. Sometimes it wasn't so easy to tell them apart.

"*Cruc...*" Potter tried, once, twice, easily thwarted with each attempt.

"No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!" Severus snarled. "You haven't got the nerve or the ability..."

"*Incarc...*"

Potter's greatest weakness... if he'd ever learned to control his emotions, his assaults would've been much more effective. Why had Dumbledore not made more of an effort in that direction? Come to that, why hadn't Severus insisted on continuing with their Occlumency lessons? Pointless questions at this late date, he supposed.

Lazily, almost amused, he blocked the spell.

"Fight back!" the boy screamed, quite out of control now. "Fight back, you cowardly..."

But then Severus had a weakness, too. He flinched from the word, seethed at the hypocrisy of it coming from that mouth in particular.

"Coward, did you call me, Potter? Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one. What would you call him, I wonder?"

"*Stupe...*"

More deflection. Another taunt. Severus could've kept it up all night if he hadn't reminded himself of the precariousness of the situation, the need to escape before the Ministry showed up. The last thing he needed was another bloody battle on his hands, or worse, a short trip to Azkaban where he would be of no use to anyone. He shouted commands to the other Death Eaters, simultaneously deflecting another curse.

And then Potter went down, screaming in agony, his body contorting on the thick summer grass. Severus was bewildered, certain he'd done nothing to inflict the least bit of pain. But of course, it wasn't him at all. He'd been so intent on their exchange that he hadn't noticed the Carrows had closed in, wands extended, faces lit up with malicious glee as Potter screamed and screamed, the sounds of his anguish chipping away at shields that were supposed to be impenetrable.

"*No!*" The word felt as if it were ripped from his throat. "Have you forgotten our orders? Potter belongs to the Dark Lord. We are to leave him! Go! Go!"

It was the worst possible time to recognize the truth... that he *did* care about the boy... that somewhere deep down, Dumbledore had been right all along. Why? Why?! Why now... indeed, why the bloody hell had it happened at all, but WHY NOW?!

No time to think about it. Potter was up again, staggering toward him, raising his wand...

*"Sectum..."*

Deflected. He was close enough now to anticipate the next spell, verbalized or not. And of course, it would have to be *Levicorpus*. Deceptively harmless...

*"You're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus."*

*"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"*

Capable of destroying everything.

*"No, Potter!"* he screamed, sending the boy flying with the sheer force of his deflection. Infuriated, he stalked forward, staring down at him with what must've been all of the pain, all of the helpless fury he'd suffered for more than twenty years, finding its climax in that single word and all it represented. "You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them — I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd turn my inventions on me like your filthy father, would you? I don't think so... no!"

Potter dove for his wand, but Severus aimed a quick hex, sending it skittering away into the darkness. His shields were slipping, almost depleted now... tired, so tired, sick of it all. Fucking Gryffindors. Couldn't the idiot boy see that the fight had been lost before he'd thrown the first hex? It was as if he *wanted* Severus to strike him down, just to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he'd been right all along.

As if confirming this, Potter stared up at him defiantly. "Kill me then. Kill me like you killed him, you coward..."

**"DON'T CALL ME A COWARD!"**

Had he intended to say something else? He'd never know... those final moments would always be a blur, a mishmash of intense, overwhelming emotion, so painful that the hippogriff's claws could do nothing to touch it.

And then he was running, running, desperate to escape it all...

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Five minutes later, Severus came back to himself, almost surprised to find himself in the drawing room of Malfoy Manor. He wiped the blood from his face, hardly noticing the deeper, more painful scratches on his arms and shoulders. His robes were in tatters, but all of this seemed to be of no account.

It was over.

And yet it wasn't, was it? No... Dumbledore's death was only the beginning.

"Come forward, Severus. Take a seat."



He looked up to find Voldemort sitting at the head of the long table, surrounded by loyal followers. His expression was triumphant, cruel mouth practically salivating in anticipation as Severus took a step toward the closest empty chair.

“No, not there! Next to me. Scoot down, Bellatrix... there’s a good girl. Wormtail! Bring Severus a glass of wine.”

The rodent bobbed his head and scurried out of the room.

“Now,” the Dark Lord hissed after Severus had settled himself in his newfound place of honor. “Tell me everything. Better yet, show me.”

Shields! Shields! Severus had no idea where he found the strength after everything he’d been through that night, but He managed it somehow, giving the Dark Lord access to a somewhat modified version of events. All of the hatred, all of the fury, twisted to make it seem like it was directed at Dumbledore himself when he’d cast the Killing Curse. Gratitude... not because his terrible task had been completed, but portrayed as if he was glad the headmaster was dead.

And Potter... that was easy. Severus concealed all traces of conflicted emotions, replacing them with open hostility. But would it be enough?

The Dark Lord withdrew, far more gentle than usual, leaning back in his chair with a satisfied smile. “I’d like to take another look at that in the near future. Brilliant, truly. You have done well, Severus, exceeded all expectations. You will be rewarded for your faithful service.”

Severus inclined his head. “My lord.”

“As for you, Draco...” The Dark Lord’s voice was suddenly colder, taking on a menacing edge. “Failed in your very first task. What future can you have in my service?”

“My lord, may I speak?”

“Of course, Severus. I think we’d all agree that you’ve earned that honor.”

“Young Mr. Malfoy here was instrumental in our success this evening. He showed a great deal of ingenuity in repairing the cabinet that allowed our reinforcements to infiltrate the castle. Without him...”

The Dark Lord’s expression was inscrutable. “And yet he did not complete the one task that had been assigned to him. Fenrir tells me he had the perfect opportunity, and still, he loses his nerve.”

Severus took a deep breath, knowing he was pushing his luck. “Yes, my lord. But the boy is only 17, and has been in Dumbledore’s custody for the better part of six years. He...”

“Are you saying this is an issue of divided loyalties?” The Dark Lord looked furious at the thought.

“No, no, not at all. But we all know what Dumbledore is — was. He could manipulate any situation to his advantage, lead even the most cynical mind to defy logic and believe whatever he chooses.”

“But not you, Severus.”

“No,” Severus said softly. ‘Not me.’ And then noticing that the Dark Lord was smiling again, clearly pleased to be reminded of his triumph, Severus pressed on. “It is hardly the boy’s fault that he has been under such... flawed tutelage for all these years. Does he not deserve the chance to prove what he’s capable of now that he’s free from that influence?”

There was a long silence, and then finally, “Very well, Severus. Very well. I will not penalize the boy this time. But be aware that my clemency is a favor to you. Certainly not to his father, who is still in disgrace.”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you.”

“And thank *you*, Severus. Your actions tonight might very well have won this war.”

The Dark Lord’s most trusted servant shared that hope... though certainly not in the way his master intended.

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Severus didn’t make it back to Spinner’s End for several days.

First he’d had to endure the celebrations, an appalling combination of alcohol, orgies, and Muggle torture. Fortunately, he’d been spared from participating thanks to a feigned illness related to his hippogriff injuries. Unfortunately, this convenient excuse had left everyone with the impression that he was too sick to travel.

Following his supposed recovery, he’d taken the enormous risk of returning to Hogwarts, wanting to be there for Dumbledore’s funeral, or at least to observe from a distance. It was a very Gryffindor thing to do, equal parts stupid and sentimental, but he couldn’t help himself. Dumbledore had been his mentor, his guide... occasionally, even his friend.

Now that his resentments were gone, or at least buried by grief, all Severus could remember was the chance he’d been given. Not quite the one he’d requested, of course, but a chance to do *something*... a sense of purpose that had kept him from getting killed or winding up in Azkaban.

Indeed, he had to be grateful for that, for her sake if not his own. Lily. How could he have known at the time that survival would mean so much more than protecting her son? A chance, however unlikely it seemed, to bring her back to the life that had been stolen from her?

That was the other reason he’d come back here. Not to retrieve Lily herself — she’d be gone by now, on her way back to Spinner’s End if she hadn’t arrived already. No, he’d returned for crucial supplies, hidden deep in the Forbidden Forest, a second shot where the first had failed.

When the sun began to set, he took the risk of moving closer, hovering over the trees as he watched the last of the stragglers depart. And then at last, he knew it was as safe as it was ever going to be.

Soon enough, he was on his way with the sack of mandrakes carefully concealed beneath his robes.

As much as he hated the place, Spinner's End came very close to being a welcoming sight this time around. Only here would he have the chance to rest and recover, regain his strength before taking part in the Dark Lord's newest ambition. But more than that...

"Lily?" he called softly as soon as he'd closed the door behind him.

No noise, no movement. The shabby little house was as silent as a tomb.

## 30. Unanticipated Delays

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### Chapter 30: Unanticipated Delays

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Lily disregarded Severus's instructions, slipping away from his quarters right after he'd departed. She wasn't immune to Dark magic, but it was easy to avoid stray curses by transferring to a dragonfly, soaring out a window and flying straight to the battlements above.

She knew he didn't want her to be there when he killed Dumbledore. That was the real reason he'd insisted she stay in the dungeons. It didn't matter that what he was about to do was unavoidable, nor that she understood his reasons better than anyone. Killing was killing, and in this case, he'd have to do it quickly and without any outward show of mercy. It was only natural for him to be afraid that this would change her perception of him, that she'd never look at him the same way again.

But she was determined to prove otherwise. If she truly loved him, she couldn't shrink from the ugliness in his life, couldn't pretend there wasn't darkness in him or that he wasn't capable of brutality when the situation called for it. Loving him in half measures would never be enough, taking the good while avoiding the bad. She'd learned that the hard way.

Arriving before Severus did, she saw Dumbledore slumped against the wall, looking as if he'd already been hit by any number of nasty curses. Draco was at the center of a small group of Death Eaters, his wand arm shaking as he lowered it to his side.

"Draco, do it or stand aside so one of us..."

Lily couldn't help wishing one of them would go ahead. Why not? No doubt their souls were already damaged beyond repair. Why should Severus have to...?

But it was too late for that. The door leading to the ramparts burst open and there he was, his black robes billowing in the nighttime breeze. His expression was inscrutable as he took stock of the situation, dark eyes lingering on Draco for a moment before coming to rest on Dumbledore.

"Severus... please..."

At the headmaster's quiet plea, Severus's face transformed, twisting into what appeared to be an expression of pure hatred. But Lily only saw the pain... deep, gut wrenching pain that would've brought a lesser man to his knees.

Then she saw a flicker of hesitation, a hint of vulnerability in his eyes as he stared down at the man he was destined to kill. It made no difference that this was exactly what Dumbledore wanted him to do. She could practically feel his heart shattering into a million pieces as he raised his wand with a cry of, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Watching the old man tumble over the ramparts was a horrific sight. Lily had no doubt it would haunt her dreams for months to come. But she also knew that what Severus had done

to *himself* in that moment was the real tragedy, far worse than a quick and painless end for Dumbledore.

And yet he'd never shrank from it, had he? It might be easy to assume that the Unbreakable Vow gave him no other choice, but Lily knew better than that. Above all things, Severus was exceedingly clever. There was always a chance he could have found an alternate solution without breaking his vow. But to the best of her knowledge, he'd never even looked for one.

Instead, he'd faced this terrible responsibility with his head held high, willing to do whatever it took to protect those around him.

Well, he'd been right about one thing. It *did* change Lily's perception of him. But she supposed it would've never crossed his mind that it might make her love him more.

---

In the aftermath, she returned to his quarters, taking a couple days to rest while deciding what her next course of action should be. It hurt to imagine him fleeing into the night like a wanted criminal, but of course, that was what he was now in the eyes of the Wizarding world. Traitor. Death Eater. Murderer. She had to get used to that fact, and then act accordingly.

"Find me," he'd said.

Where? Spinner's End? It seemed like an enormous risk for him to return there now, but since he hadn't given her any other options, she didn't know where else to go. Unfortunately, traveling the distance would mean leaving both her cat form and the plastic letters behind, but that couldn't be helped.

Or could it? With a burst of excitement, she rushed up the stairs and through the deserted halls, making straight for the Owlery.

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"Suspicious, wouldn't you say?"

"Very suspicious. Best get Arthur up here to take a look."

"Weasley's been promoted, remember?"

"So? He knows more about this... Muggle stuff than anyone."

"Right. Okay then, I'll see if he's available."

The voices were muffled, indistinct through the heavy canvas. Were they ever going to let her out? She felt as if she'd been stuck in here for hours, waiting for the Ministry to determine whether or not she was transporting unknown paraphernalia on behalf of Voldemort and his followers... or for the Order of the Phoenix, as far as she knew. No telling which side the Ministry was championing at the moment.

Of course, switching animals and getting the hell out of there would've been the most obvious solution. But she really was trapped, barely able to hear and unable to see at all.

There was nothing she could do but wait, hoping Severus wouldn't think the worst if he returned to Spinner's End to find that she wasn't there.

The faint sound of footsteps... an opening door...

"What do we have here?" This was a different voice, kinder and much more familiar than the others.

"Captured it midflight, we did. You should've seen Dawlish here... swept down just like a falcon, dropped that sack over its head as quick as you please. Shame he never played Quidditch. Would've made one hell of a Seeker."

"Ah, wasn't as impressive as all that. She would've given me the slip easily enough if she hadn't been carrying such a big basket. Slowed her down quite a lot."

"And it's the contents of the basket you wanted me to look at?" Arthur said, his voice calm and businesslike.

"Well, there were only a couple things. This cat here..."

"A Hogwarts owl by the looks of it. Well, nothing unusual about that. Quite a few students have already gone home for the summer. One of them must have left their pet behind and sent back for it. Happens all the time. Why, when Charlie was at school..."

"Sorry, sir, but it's not the cat we're concerned about. It's these."

There was a faint clatter, as if the letters were being poured out onto the table. Arthur let out a loud, ringing laugh. "These are a Muggle toy, Dawlish. Nothing more. See these black boxes on the back? You stick them on a refrigerator."

"We already assumed they were Muggle in origin. But why would an owl be transporting them from Hogwarts on the day of Dumbledore's funeral?"

Arthur cleared his throat. "Have you gone through all the preliminary tests?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you found nothing?"

"Nothing as far as we could tell."

"Well then, I'll give you my theory. Some Muggle-born student brought these to school this year. A reminder of their childhood, a little piece of home. And then after what happened to... to Dumbledore, the student was too distraught to gather all his or her things before departing. If that's the case, we're not only wasting our time, but possibly depriving a child of much-needed comfort during a very difficult time."

"But sir... well, don't you think a closer examination might be a good idea? I mean, just to be on the safe side, you know."

Arthur let out a sigh. "As I said, I don't think it's necessary. But if you must, I won't stop you. Just be quick about it, eh?"

It was several weeks before Lily was free to go on her way. Not because the tests had taken that long. Oh no, those had been concluded in a couple days. But afterward, she'd been locked up in a holding cell to wait for the results, convinced they'd forgotten about her by the end of it all.

As soon as they released her, she flew straight to Spinner's End, relieved to see an open window as she dropped from the sky. Yes, Severus was home. She glided into the kitchen, depositing the basket on the table with no small amount of noise. A quick switch to her favorite form and she went to investigate, becoming alarmed as she noticed the state of the house.

Empty bottles. Abandoned cups of coffee. Clothes strewn everywhere. Granted, the house always had an air of being disused, what with the shabby, outdated furniture and perpetual layer of dust. But what she was seeing now wasn't like Severus at all, who was always relatively neat when he was in residence.

She passed through the empty study and crept up the stairs, fearful of what she might find. It was only when she entered the bedroom that she saw him. Half dressed, he was sprawled out across the bed, looking positively wretched. His face was covered with more than a week's worth of stubble, his features tense in a way that suggested a considerable amount of pain. She couldn't tell if that pain was physical or emotional, though she suspected the latter.

He was fast asleep.

Her first impulse was to wake him, but among other things, the poor man looked exhausted. And so she let him sleep through the rest of the day, waiting patiently beside him as afternoon gave way to nightfall.

Finally, he came back to consciousness with a long-suffering moan, opening his eyes to stare blankly at the ceiling. He didn't even notice her until he turned on his side, reaching for his wand on the bedside table.

"Lily?" he croaked.

She moved closer, nuzzling at his shoulder as he let out a shuddering breath.

"I thought you'd left me... or... dead. I didn't... couldn't... no idea where to look. Where have you been?"

Full awareness was a slow effort. It took him a moment to realize she couldn't answer. He apologized, mumbling that it didn't matter as long as she was here. Lily felt awful... not that it was her fault that she'd been detained by the Ministry, but she hated that he'd had to suffer for her sake. And after what had happened with Dumbledore... well, it was no wonder he was such a mess.

Still, he managed to pull himself together with a hot shower and an even hotter cup of coffee. She followed him into the kitchen, amused by his bewilderment as he noticed the basket sitting on the table, along with the owl who was happily availing herself of the treats he kept in a bowl on the counter.

"You flew here... with the cat?"

She nodded.

“Impressive.” Reaching into the basket, he pulled out the letters, smiling ever so slightly as he spread them across the table. “Very impressive. Well perhaps after all, you can tell me where you’ve been.”

Patiently, she began to spell out, S...

“Ministry. Say no more. They detained you?”

Another nod.

Severus snorted. “Hardly surprising. Not that I’ve had much contact with the outside world, but I’m sure the paranoia has reached new levels of ridiculousness. Only matched by incompetence, no doubt. They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

She shook her head and he breathed a sigh of relief. “Good.” He stuffed a couple of whiskey bottles in the rubbish bin, looking slightly ashamed as he did so. “I know it’s a disaster around here, but I haven’t been idle. Not completely. The second potion is ready. I have three variations for you to try as soon as you feel up to it.”

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Severus was still struggling to get his bearings as they headed down to the basement. The past few weeks had been a blur of misery, fresh grief over Dumbledore manifesting itself in endless nightmares, treated with nearly toxic amounts of Dreamless Sleep and far too much whiskey. But even that would’ve been manageable had it not been for his growing fear that Lily wasn’t coming back. To lose her again after all this time, at the very moment he might have a way to bring her back in truth? Unthinkable.

“Hop up on the counter there.” She did as he asked while he lifted the wards on the cabinet where he kept his most valuable potions — Veritaserum, Polyjuice, a handful of poisons and their antidotes, and a tiny vial of Felix Felicis. Should he take a little of the last one before proceeding?

No... he felt optimistic about this newest potion, his hands trembling as he withdrew the bottles and placed them on the counter.

“All right, I think we’ll try this one first.” Pulling out the stopper, he poured the shimmering blue liquid into a bowl, setting it down in front of her. “Whatever happens, there shouldn’t be any ill effects.”

But Lily hardly seemed concerned about that. She’d already ducked her head, consuming the potion with soft lapping sounds. Once she was finished, Severus closed his eyes, taking several deep breaths to calm himself. If it worked, the change would be immediate.

*Please...*

But when he opened his eyes again, she was exactly the same.

“Nevermind then,” he said quietly. “We still have two more to try.”

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Since it was necessary to wait 24 hours between doses, they tried the second variation on the following night. This one yielded results, though not the kind Severus was hoping for. It made Lily uncommonly drowsy... she slept all the way through to the third night, when he was ready to make his final attempt.

Again he considered using the Felix Felicis, but immediately ruled it out. If none of the mandrake elixirs were destined to work, there was only one other option open to him. If it came to that, he'd need all the luck he could get.

He kept his eyes open this time, his stare boring into her as if he could produce the desired results through sheer force of will. After a moment, she began to change, her fur growing longer, thicker, more glossy in appearance.

But that was all.

"Don't worry," he said, his voice sounding hollow despite his efforts to prevent it. "We'll just... find another way."

That was the worst part about it. It wasn't that he was incapable of finding a solution, but he was swiftly running out of time. Any wizard, however exceptional, rarely made progress with such complicated solutions without a great deal of trial and error. He could've sped things up if he'd had the luxury of devoting his full attention to his experiments, but alas...

He cursed under his breath as the Dark Mark started to burn, as if it had chosen this moment to remind him that he was living on borrowed time.

"The bastard is summoning me again," he muttered to Lily, who was sitting quietly beside the empty bowl. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

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"Now that Hogwarts is fully under our control," the Dark Lord said, his eyes glittering with satisfaction, "it would please me to have my new headmaster in residence. Severus?"

"Of course, my lord. Would tomorrow morning be acceptable?"

"Yes, that will do. The Carrows have already arrived — it's up to you to decide which positions will be most suitable for their talents."

Severus responded with a deferential nod, keeping his feelings carefully concealed. This was no more than he'd expected, of course, but he was just beginning to realize how difficult the upcoming school year was going to be. The Carrows would be merciless...

"And speaking of children, let us discuss one child in particular. Or, to be more accurate, a boy who will no longer *be* a child in a matter of weeks. Of course, I'm speaking of Harry Potter." The Dark Lord's features twisted into a mask of hatred as he uttered the name. "Soon, the blood protection will be gone, at which point our enemies will transport him to a more secure location. We cannot allow that to happen."

This statement was met by a chorus of murmured assent.

"Again, I'm counting on you, Severus. Find out when this is expected to take place, and we will proceed from there."

“Yes, my lord.”

When the meeting was adjourned, Severus Apparated back to Spinner’s End. He grabbed a few hours of sleep and then rose at daybreak, hastily packing his things while informing Lily that they were leaving for Hogwarts. She accepted the news without complaint. Indeed, she seemed pleased by the prospect, which filled him with dread. Would she come to hate him for the things he’d have to do, even if she understood the reasons for them?

It didn’t matter. Leaving her behind wasn’t an option, whether at Spinner’s End or some other safe location. He couldn’t be separated from her, especially now that he was ready to make his last, desperate attempt to restore her to her former self. This was his final chance... by the time the school year started, it would already be too late.

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“Wonderful to see you, Severus! How have you been?”

“Do you *really* want me to answer that question?”

“Oh, come now,” said Dumbledore’s portrait, eyes twinkling. “Is that any way to greet an old friend?”

Severus scowled, leaning back in the headmaster’s chair. “First, I’m not quite sure we were ever friends. Second, forgive me if I don’t know precisely how to behave when talking to a man I’ve recently killed.”

Dumbledore’s demeanor changed, becoming somber. “I’m sorry, Severus. Truly, I am. And yes, I can see you’ve had a difficult time of it lately. Not sleeping much these days? I hope that’s not on my account. Now more than ever, I can see that this was the best possible solution.”

“For whom?”

“For all of us,” the portrait said quietly. “When this war is over, I hope you’ll realize...”

“You say that like I’ll still be alive. As if I’m not one of your sacrificial lambs, just like the boy.”

The portrait didn’t even have the grace to look uncomfortable. “Speaking of Harry,” he said, “your master must know he reaches his majority at the end of the month...”

“He’s not my master!” Severus snapped.

“Fair enough. Just make sure he continues to think otherwise. To that end, you will have to give him the correct date of Harry’s departure from his aunt and uncle’s. Not to do so will raise suspicion, when Voldemort believes you so well informed.”

Reluctantly, Severus nodded.

“However, you must plant the idea of decoys. That, I think, ought to ensure Harry’s safety. Try Confunding Mundungus Fletcher.” Dumbledore paused, staring at him intently. “And Severus, if you are forced to take part in the chase, be sure to act your part convincingly. I am counting on you to remain in Lord Voldemort’s good books as long as possible, or Hogwarts will be left to the mercy of the Carrows.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I know, Severus. You always do.”

Now more than ever, Severus hoped that his best would be good enough. With that thought, he remembered Lily, still waiting in her basket at the bottom of the stairs. He retrieved her along with his possessions, returning to the office and then glancing around in bewilderment.

“Where are your... that is, where are my private quarters?”

The portrait smiled. “You’ll find them just behind that tapestry, the one with the Gryffindor mascot. Erm, I imagine you’ll want to change that.”

Severus stepped over to the wall, pushing the hanging aside to reveal a narrow door. It was made of solid oak, intricately decorated with runes and ancient scrollwork.

“I never knew this was here.”

Dumbledore’s portrait chuckled. “Of course not. It only reveals itself to the resident headmaster.”

“No exceptions?”

“No exceptions. The headmaster’s private quarters are protected by the most powerful magic in existence. Untraceable. Unplottable. The only way for anyone else to enter, or even be made aware of them at all, is if you adjust the wards to allow it. You’ll find a book on the bedside table, explaining how this can be done along with other pertinent information.”

“What about the house-elves?” Severus asked, intrigued.

“That is left to your discretion. I never saw any reason to keep them out, but every headmaster makes his or her own choice to that effect. If you *do* allow them to enter, rest assured that they will never be able to speak of anything that goes on inside.”

“I understand. Thank you. I think I’ll...”

“Yes, go on in there and get a little rest. You look like you need it.”

Severus pushed the door open, sucking in a sharp breath as he saw what lay beyond. Not just a couple of rooms, but an entire suite of them, the walls ornately decorated from floor to ceiling with fine tapestries, gilded scrollwork, and large murals depicting various landscapes surrounding Hogwarts. There wasn’t a single human portrait among them, another measure that ensured complete privacy.

Setting the basket down on a beautifully carved table, he released Lily before continuing his explorations. She seemed as impressed as he was, following slowly in his wake.

The rooms were fully carpeted, plush and crimson beneath his feet. Crimson? Oh yes... Gryffindor colors all over the place. Scowling in disapproval, he flicked his wand, changing the color scheme from garish red and gold to a much more suitable green and silver. But then he paused, glancing down at the cat. Another flick and the decor transformed again, Slytherin green melting into a velvety plum hue.

“Better?” he said, smirking as she bobbed her head in approval. “Yes, I’d be inclined to agree.”

## 31. Last Ditch Effort

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### Chapter 31: Last Ditch Effort

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Having risen to new heights in the Dark Lord's favor, Severus was free to come and go as he pleased. No surveillance to worry about, no need to prove his loyalty through any of the typical Death Eater activities. It couldn't last, of course... Voldemort was too paranoid to let anyone escape his scrutiny for long, even if that person happened to be his most trusted servant.

How long did he have? A few weeks, maybe? Days? It didn't matter. Severus intended to take full advantage of his grace period, which was why he only spent a single night at Hogwarts before he was ready to depart again.

"Business for the Dark Lord," he told Lily, avoiding her curious stare. "I don't know how long it will take, but it shouldn't be more than a few days. Will you be all right while I'm gone?"

She glanced at the heaping platters he'd set out on the table, clearly amused. Well, perhaps he *had* gone a little overboard, but better to leave her too much than not enough. Besides, a well-placed Stasis Charm meant that the food wouldn't spoil in his absence.

"Very well. I'll just grab a few things and I'll be off." He went in the bedroom to pack the essentials — clean clothes, a small set of emergency potions, a couple books, and a few other odds and ends. Distracted by his preparations, he hardly noticed the soft clicking sounds coming from the other room until he emerged to find a message waiting for him in the middle of the floor.

#### WILL MISS YOU

Lily was stretched out beside her handiwork, casual and relaxed, as if expressing such a sentiment was the most ordinary thing in the world. Maybe she didn't realize she was the only one who'd ever said those words to him... that everyone else in his life had merely tolerated his presence, either because they had no other choice or it was in their advantage to do so. The idea that someone could enjoy his company simply for the sake of it? That was something Severus hadn't allowed himself to consider in a long time, if it had ever occurred to him at all.

"You will?" he said quietly, letting out a long, shuddering sigh as she nodded. "I... ah, yes. I'll miss you, too."

As he'd always done with Lily, he wondered why the strongest feelings were the hardest to put into words.

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Severus's first order of business was to find Mundungus Fletcher, a journey that led him to the seediest part of Muggle London. He'd considered disguising himself for this particular endeavor, but in the end, there was no need for that. Mundungus didn't put up even a token resistance before attempting to buy his way out of danger.

"I'm not interested in Black family heirlooms," Severus told him, his voice icy. "I just need a moment of your time. Grant me that small favor and I'll let you leave here unharmed."

Once Mundungus was Confunded, it was easy to impart the necessary information. Polyjuice Potion. Identical Potters. Personally, Severus thought a Portkey would've been a more sensible solution, or even for the Order to have taken the boy directly into hiding when the school year had ended. But Dumbledore had been insistent on this plan.

"I understand," Mundungus said, looking dazed.

Next, Severus set out on a much more personal mission. This one was... well, it was madness, really. He was taking an enormous risk where the chance of success was minimal at best. But he was growing desperate now, having neither the time or the resources to try any other alternative. This was his last shot.

Little Whinging looked exactly the same as it had on his previous visits years before. Well, other than half a dozen Death Eaters lurking about, trying to make themselves inconspicuous among the Muggle suburbanites strolling up and down the sidewalks. A wasted effort, to say the least.

"Ah, Severus! I didn't know you'd been commanded to join the watch. I thought your talents were reserved for more important matters these days."

Severus smirked, amused by the bitterness in Dolohov's voice. "Indeed," he said smoothly. "And what, should I ask, is more important than keeping an eye on the boy who lives in that house?"

"I thought your job was to spy on the Order, not hang around on street corners like the rest of us."

"My job is to do as the Dark Lord commands. As is yours. If you have any issues with my presence here, I'd suggest you take your complaints to him."

"No, of course not," Dolohov said hastily, sounding much more subdued. "I only meant..."

Severus strode away, pleased to see that the rest of the Death Eaters gave him a wide berth. Of course, he hadn't come here at Voldemort's behest, but they didn't know that. He didn't think any of them would be stupid enough to question it, but even if they did, he could supply any number of legitimate reasons for being here. He could say he'd been confirming the date and time of Potter's departure, perhaps, or dispelling a rumor that the boy was already gone.

Indeed, almost any excuse he could give would be far more believable than the truth.

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Nearly two days later, Petunia finally exited the house alone, casting a surreptitious glance up and down the street as she hurried to unlock her car. The Death Eaters were carefully

concealed, but it was good that she realized there was a threat and took it seriously. Not like the idiot she was married to, who'd strutted off to work that morning as if nothing in the world could hurt him.

Casting a quick Disillusionment Charm, Severus followed by way of flight, keeping pace with her for about a dozen blocks until she turned into one of those fast food restaurants Muggles were so inexplicably fond of. He smirked to himself, imagining that overgrown son of hers pestering her until facing a horde of murderous Death Eaters had seemed preferable to listening to him whine.

Watching her hurry inside, he debated on what to do next. He had a decent supply of Polyjuice on him, but this was one situation that wouldn't lend itself to trickery. Ducking into a cluster of bushes, he made a few adjustments to his own appearance instead, hoping like hell she wouldn't run screaming at the sight of him. If he could just get her to talk to him, there was a chance... miniscule at best, but still a chance.

The restaurant was crowded, which was good for two reasons. First, Petunia would have to wait for her food, and second, she wouldn't want to cause a scene in front of an audience.

Stepping up behind her, he cleared his throat... once, twice, and then again, until she finally took the hint and turned around.

Her eyes went wide, shock mingled with fear. "S-Severus? Is that you?"

His first instinct was to make a sarcastic remark, but he restrained himself, determined to be polite. As loath as he was to admit it, he needed her too much to run the risk of scaring her off.

"Yes, it's me," he said quietly. "I need to speak with you, Petunia."

She took a step back, attempting to put a little more distance between them. "What is this all about? And why are you wearing...?"

"Muggle clothing?"

"Shhh! Not so loud!"

"Sorry," Severus said, flashing her an apologetic smile that felt more like a grimace. "I just thought it would make you more comfortable if I looked a bit less... conspicuous."

She gave him a skeptical look, taking in his black trousers and white dress shirt, her eyes lingering on the long black hair that was uncharacteristically tied back in a neat queue. "A slight improvement, I'll give you that. But why would you care what I think? You never have before."

"Fair point," he interrupted smoothly. "Would you like me to apologize?"

"Not particularly," she said, looking unnerved at the idea. "Anyway, I've got to get this food home to Dudley, so we'd better make this quick. What do you want?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that the boy could survive on his own fat for years to come, but again, he stopped himself. "I need to speak with you about an urgent matter. Otherwise, believe me, I wouldn't have come. It's about..."

“Him?” she whispered, and he knew she was referring to Voldemort.

“Well, yes. In part. But I also need to talk to you about... Lily.”

Her defenses went up, thin lips twisting into a ferocious scowl. “Is this about Harry? Look, I don’t know what he’s been saying, but I’ve taken good care of him. Fed him, clothed him, sheltered him for all these years, and what thanks do I get? To hear him tell it, we’re all in mortal danger. He wants us to go into hiding, did you know that? Did you know...?”

“Yes, I know everything. I’m not here to question you about the boy. You’ve kept him alive and relatively unharmed, which is good enough for me.”

“Then what is it? Listen, I don’t have time...”

“It won’t take long. Can we sit down?”

Petunia cast a nervous glance at the other patrons. “All right. But not here. Someone might hear us.”

“Heaven forbid,” Severus said with a faint edge of sarcasm. “Where then?”

“The house?”

“No. The boy must not know what I’m about to tell you. *No one* must know, understand?”

“Fine. Where would you suggest?”

“Your car?”

She looked appalled. “Sitting in my car, talking to a strange man... what if it got back to Vernon?”

“It hardly bears thinking,” he responded, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. “Well, I could use a Disillusionment Charm.”

“Not so loud! Is that the thing when no one can see you?”

“Precisely.”

“But then it’ll just look like I’m talking to myself. Everyone will think I’m cracked.”

“Everyone, who? Do you even know any of these people? Why do you care what they think?”

She glared at him, her eyes icy. “Someone I know might drive by. Listen, maybe this isn’t a good idea...”

“No!” he said hastily, then lowered his voice before she could warn him again. “No. We can talk right here. Look, there’s an empty table.”

“But someone might...”

“No one will hear us.”

She frowned. “How do you know?”

“Because I can cast a charm to make sure they can’t. In fact, I already have. It’s been in place ever since we started talking.”



“You’re crazy. You can’t...”

Severus focused his attention on a man who was standing just a few feet away, dressed in a gaudy Hawaiian shirt. “That,” he said, loudly and distinctly, “is the ugliest shirt I’ve ever seen. Goes well with your face though, I’ll give you that.”

“How could you...?!” Petunia hissed under her breath. But then she stopped, realizing that indeed, the man couldn’t hear them at all.

“Try it yourself.”

“Are you crazy? I most certainly will *not*...”

“Do it,” he said, deepening his voice to a silky, persuasive purr. “Come on, Petunia. Just this once, wouldn’t you love to say what you *really* think?”

She sniffed, refusing to meet his eyes. “If I say something inappropriate, you’ll make sure the entire restaurant hears it. I’m not an idiot, Severus.”

“If my intention was to embarrass you, believe me, I could do far worse. For example, I could make you sprout a tail. I hear your boy is fond of that one. Or I could make you soil yourself, or...”

“You are one twisted...”

“Yes,” Severus said calmly. “But that’s beside the point. I’m not saying I intend to *do* any of those things, only that I *could*. Now go ahead. Say something shocking.”

Petunia hesitated, but he could see that she was intrigued by the idea. And then finally, her eyes darted to a woman who was standing off to the left. “That is a hideous dress.”

“Oh, come on, Petunia. You can do better than that.”

More confident now, she spoke a little louder. “Skintight fuchsia vinyl? Dear, you look like a prostitute.”

“I’d be inclined to agree,” Severus said. “Though I certainly wouldn’t pay for her services.”

Petunia giggled before she remembered herself, giving him a stern look. “All right, Severus. Five minutes. But that’s it!”

“Thank you. That’s all I ask. Let’s sit down, shall we?”

Severus knew it would take longer than five minutes, but he also had a feeling she would forget all about her dear Dudley’s ravenous appetite when she heard what he had to say. He’d been puzzling over it for days — how to break it to her gently, what strategy might be the most persuasive. But in the end, realizing that nothing would make it any less shocking, he just blurted it out.

“What?” She looked at him blankly, as if he’d been speaking a foreign language she’d never heard.

“I said,” he repeated, his voice barely above a whisper. “That Lily survived.”

“What? No... no, that’s impossible. I was the one who made arrangements for her burial. I was there, Severus. I saw her body, I...”

Letting out a shuddering sigh, he pushed the image away. “I know. I saw it, too.”

“Then how can you say...? My sister *died*! That, that... oh, you know who I’m talking about. He killed her! Lily, and her husband, too! Isn’t that why we took Harry in? Isn’t it *my* blood that’s been protecting him all these years? Because she *made* that sacrifice?”

“Yes,” Severus said, meeting her bewildered gaze without flinching. “She *did* die... at least in a physical sense. But her soul lives on.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Petunia, you’re not ignorant of our world. Not completely. Didn’t she tell you about the ghosts? The portraits?”

“I thought she was trying to make me jealous. You’re telling me all of that was *real*?”

“Yes, of course it’s real.” Severus sighed. “The magic of life and death is... complicated, to say the least. Even I can’t pretend to understand exactly what happened to Lily or why she was spared. Up until a year ago, I thought she was gone. But...”

“*She is gone!*” Petunia burst out, slamming her hands on the table. “I saw her, Severus! *I saw her*. I was there when they put her in the ground! I was *there*, so don’t you dare try to tell me that... nevermind. I’m leaving. I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, but...”

“Please,” Severus whispered as she started to rise, pouring all his love and grief into that single word. “Please, I know you and I have never gotten along. But you also know how I felt about your sister. She’s... sacred to me. I would never, *never*...”

Petunia slumped back into her seat. “Yes, I suppose I *do* know that. But what you’re saying still doesn’t make sense.”

“I know.”

“Are you trying to tell me that she’s a... ghost?”

“No. She’s very much alive, only she doesn’t have a corporal body. Beyond that, I know little. The spell is almost unheard of in our world. She’s... well, to put it in the simplest terms, she’s confined to the body of an animal.”

“Like an Animagus?”

Severus looked at her, surprised. “Lily told you about...? No, she’s not an Animagus. Animagi can switch back and forth at will. She’s more or less trapped.”

“So she’s been alive all these years... and no one knew? Not even Harry?”

“Only myself and the boy’s godfather. As I’m sure you know, he happens to be dead now.”

“All right. Assuming that all of this is true, why wouldn’t you tell anyone? Were you trying to keep her to yourself? That part wouldn’t surprise me, at least. You always *were* the jealous sort.”

“Likewise,” Severus said, sneering just a little. “But no, I haven’t been doing it for myself. I’m trying to protect her. As the boy has told you, there’s a war going on in our world.”

Petunia gave him a searching look. “I know you wouldn’t make all of this up. You loved her too much for that. But are you sure this isn’t just what you *want* to believe? I mean, I... miss her, too. Sometimes. But...”

“It’s Lily. I *know* it is. Now, I can waste more of your time attempting to explain *why* I know, or you can take my word for it. At any rate, I didn’t come just to tell you she survived. I want to restore her to herself... the way she used to be.”

“Is that possible?”

“I don’t know. If I could test more theories, delve deeper into my research, I’m sure I could find a way. Unfortunately, I don’t have that kind of time.”

“Why not?”

“Because short of a miracle, I’ll be dead within the year.”

“Oh, I see.” Petunia didn’t react with pity or false reassurances, for which he was grateful. “Well no, I don’t. You tell me that my dead sister has been alive all these years. You say she’s trapped in the body of an animal. And then you say you want to bring her back... as human?”

“Yes.”

“But then you claim that it can’t be done because you’re on the brink of death yourself.”

Severus shook his head. “I never said that it *couldn’t* be done. Even with my limited time and lack of options, I *might* be able to pull it off. But I won’t stand a chance without your help.”

“My help? According to your kind, I’m useless. Might as well not even exist, right? Wasn’t that what you used to tell me?”

“Petunia, I...”

“If I’m so unimportant, then why don’t you and the rest of the freaks just leave me alone? I would’ve been happy with that, but no! Take care of Lily’s son, Petunia! He needs your protection! Oh, don’t mind us... just thought we’d drop into your fireplace and destroy your living room. Don’t worry about Dudley. He’ll be all right if you just let us shrink his tongue. I’m bloody *sick* of...”

“I know,” Severus interrupted, still determined to show restraint. “I know, and you’re entirely correct. It isn’t fair. And for my part, I should’ve never said...”

“You’re just playing nice because you want something from me. Don’t pretend you’ve ever cared about my feelings.”

He gave her a measuring look. No, he couldn’t lie to her, even if she would’ve been fool enough to believe it. There was too much bad blood between them, too many memories of how vicious she’d been with Lily, who’d never done a thing to deserve such cruelty from her own sister. Indeed, he hated her as much as he ever had, especially now that her features were twisted into a resentful scowl. What the fuck did she have to be so angry about? Yes, she’d

had to deal with a few inconveniences over the years, but that was *nothing* compared to what Lily had been through.

If he'd come here for any other reason, this would be the point where he would've subjected her to one of his nastiest tirades. But for Lily's sake, he had to hold his tongue.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I *do* want something. I want to give your sister her life back... a life that was taken from her much too soon. That's all. How I feel about you or vice versa is irrelevant. We both cared about *her*, yes?"

She was staring out the window now, leaning back in her chair with her arms folded across her chest. "Fine," she muttered. "Get on with it then. Tell me what you want so I can get the hell out of here."

"Well, it's quite simple, really." He paused, taking a deep breath. "I need your blood."

"What?!"

"Not much. A few small vials should do the trick."

"Are you insane?! As if I haven't done enough already, *now* you want me to slice myself open so you can use my blood in some voodoo ritual to bring my dead sister back to life?"

"Petunia, *she isn't dead*. I already told you..."

"I *know* what you told me," she snapped. "I still think you're delusional, but even if I *did* believe you... there are limits, you know. How *dare* you ask me for..."

"Because I have no other choice. Trust me, I wouldn't be here if I did."

"And if I say no?"

"Then a small chance becomes no chance at all. You'll have to decide for yourself if you want that on your conscience."

Her eyes were cold, colder than he'd ever seen them. "Screw you, Severus. There's no way I'm going to..."

"Mum?"

He cursed under his breath, releasing the silencing charm as Dudley Dursley came bounding up to the table.

"Mum, it's been more than two hours!" the boy whined, squashing in beside her without waiting for an invitation to do so. "Where's my food?"

"I'm so sorry, darling. It's just that I ran into..."

"Hello, I'm... Tobias. I work at the nursery just up the road. Your mother is one of my favorite customers, so when I saw her here, I asked how her chrysanthemums were doing. Then we started talking about fertilizers, and you know how it goes."

Of course, Dudley had no idea what he was talking about. Severus didn't either, for that matter, but it seemed to work well enough. Petunia nodded, looking relieved.

"Whatever. So, are you done now? I really *am* hungry."

“Yes, my darling, of course. I have your food right here.”

Dudley ripped into the bag, stuffing half a cheeseburger in his mouth and then dropping the rest of it with an exaggerated grimace. “Mum, it’s *cold!* I can’t eat this!”

Petunia dug around in her handbag, withdrawing a couple of bills and stuffing them into his hand. “Here, Dudders. Go buy yourself something else. Anything you want. I’ll be along in a minute.”

Looking slightly mollified, the boy rose and made his way toward the counter.

“That was close,” Petunia murmured under her breath. “*Too* close. I have to go now.”

“Wait!”

Unfortunately, Dudley was already on his way back, his features fixed in a petulant scowl. “I need more money, Mum.”

She got to her feet, and it was then that Severus decided to go for it, for all that he knew it was a wasted effort. Withdrawing a tiny sack from his pocket, he tossed it into her purse at the exact moment she pulled it open to scrounge for more cash. And then realizing she was about to throw it right back at him, he conspicuously elevated his voice. “There’s those special seeds we discussed. As promised.”

Petunia’s eyes were full of fury, but they both knew she wouldn’t cause a scene. Better to toss the precious vials in the rubbish bin as soon as she got home, which would surely be the end result of this pointless fiasco.

“Goodbye, Petunia,” he murmured, choosing his final words with care. “And for what it’s worth, I wouldn’t worry about any small animals you might run over with your car. Pesticides in the garden, mousetraps around the house? What are the odds, really?”

Without another word, he turned away, heading straight for the door. No, he couldn’t force her to help him. But he’d damn sure make her suffer for her refusal.

## 32. Those He Couldn't Save

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### Chapter 32: Those He Couldn't Save

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Severus ducked into the bushes behind the restaurant, snarling in frustration as his nerve endings caught fire. Bloody fantastic. As always, the Dark Lord had impeccable timing.

Sighing heavily, he withdrew a tiny bundle from his pocket, restoring his Death Eater robes to their normal size before stripping off his Muggle clothing. He tried not to notice as Petunia drove away, her tail lights fading in the distance as if perfectly synchronized with his waning hope. But when those lights disappeared, he could no longer ignore the truth.

It was over. He had failed.

The Dursleys would soon be beyond his reach, though he supposed that hardly mattered. What else could he have said to change Petunia's mind? He'd given her the truth, which had been the most powerful weapon in his arsenal. His *only* weapon, really, since the spell would've been tainted by anything other than a willing sacrifice. But the truth had gotten him nowhere.

Oh, he understood her skepticism. Even for him, accustomed to a world where unprecedented discoveries were commonplace, he'd believed that Lily's survival was outside the realm of possibility. But that was the difference between him and Petunia. The slightest suggestion, one chance in a billion that Lily was alive? He wouldn't have been able to turn his back on that. No way in hell.

But Petunia didn't think that way, which he should've realized before embarking on such a futile endeavor. Her version of "caring about Lily" had only ever amounted to feelings of obligation mingled with selfish resentment. Why had he been foolish enough to hope that this time would be different?

Severus straightened his robes, struggling to bring his emotions under control. Fury, sorrow, disappointment... all of which led him to the same conclusion. He was so tired of feeling helpless, of ending up in one situation after another where he couldn't do a damn thing to set things right. And always, *always* when it mattered most.

Well, if nothing else, at least he had the letters.

He'd written the original copy on his last night at Hogwarts, duplicating it more than a dozen times before he was satisfied. One was addressed to Lupin, along with several copies for the Weasleys. He'd appealed to a few of the other Order members, in addition to a handful of professors he held in high esteem. One was reserved for Potter, of course, and he'd even included a copy for the Granger girl.

It went against his nature to expose Lily's secret this way. But if he was going to die, what choice did he have? There was no way in hell he was going to leave her alone, friendless, the

truth of her existence buried in the grave along with him. He wanted the comfort of knowing that *someone* would be there to help her when he was gone.

Even so, he had no intention of sharing the letters just yet. He wouldn't do that until the last possible moment, when he knew the war was coming to an end, knew that she'd be safe. Until then, they were carefully concealed in the headmaster's office, rendered undetectable by charms that would only break upon his death.

What then? What would happen to her once the Dark Lord was defeated? The others would be able to help her, wouldn't they? Yes... and they'd have all the most crucial elements to work with, options that were frustratingly beyond his reach. Plenty of time, opportunities to consult outside sources, the luxury of devoting all their attention to testing and research. They'd find a way to bring her back.

Severus wanted that more than anything, even if it hurt like hell to know that he wouldn't be alive to see it. He'd sell his soul to hear her voice again, just for one last chance to gaze into those beautiful eyes, maybe even touch her hair if the fates could ever be so kind. That glorious hair, seeming as if it would scorch his fingers like a living flame, yet so soft, so impossibly...

Reality intruded on his thoughts, bittersweet musings replaced by an awful burning sensation he could no longer ignore. His fingers hovered over the Dark Mark, a brief hesitation as he dropped his shields into place. And then he pressed them firmly against his flesh, his breath catching in his throat as he was whisked away.

The next thing he knew, he was striding across the neatly manicured grounds of Malfoy Manor, shoving his regrets into some obscure corner of his mind. After all, perhaps it was for the best that he wouldn't survive. Even if he did, it wasn't like he had a future with Lily. He'd probably be locked up in Azkaban for the rest of his life, with no one left to vouch for him now that Dumbledore was gone. Besides, Lily had never wanted him anyway. They might be close now, closer than they'd ever been, despite her limitations. But he couldn't delude himself into thinking her attachment was based on anything other than loneliness and fear. After all, she had no one else to turn to.

Well, that was the point, wasn't it? The future was irrelevant. In the present, he was all she had. She needed his protection, needed him to stay strong and follow through on his promise. Without him, the Wizarding world would fall into darkness, leaving her to a fate that was too terrible to contemplate.

He would never let that happen, even if a slow and torturous death was the inevitable reward for his efforts. Cold comfort indeed, but at least his devotion would make for one hell of an epitaph.

Fully in control now, Severus swept into the drawing room, his sense of purpose renewed. And then he nearly stopped in his tracks, spotting the unconscious woman who was suspended above the table. Charity Burbage. Oh no, not her. Fuck. The nameless ones were bad enough, filling the halls with their pitiful pleas and screams of anguish. But a trusted colleague, a friend, a woman he would've protected with his life under different circumstances...

*Keep moving, Severus. Keep moving. It's too late for her now.*

“Severus, here,” commanded a high, ringing voice, and he forced himself to step forward, settling himself in the chair directly to Voldemort’s right. This drew envious glances from the other Death Eaters, but at the moment, he gave even less of a damn than usual. He just wanted to deliver his information and get the hell out of there... preferably without having to witness another murder. He’d seen enough senseless death to last a lifetime.

“So?” said the Dark Lord.

Knowing exactly what he wanted, Severus gave it to him without hesitation. “My lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next, at nightfall.”

There, it was done. He hated to expose the boy, but what choice did he have?

“Saturday... at nightfall,” Voldemort repeated with relish. And then came the test, those hideous eyes scorching Severus like molten lead as his mind was plundered. As usual, he didn’t betray even a hint of disloyalty, which made the Dark Lord smile in satisfaction. “Good. Very good.”

Yaxley interrupted, insisting that Severus had been been misinformed. No surprise there. The Death Eaters tried to thwart him at every turn these days, which was almost amusing in its futile desperation. Really, did Yaxley think he’d put his exalted position at risk by supplying inaccurate information? Idiot. But then, they all were.

Naturally, he already knew about the false lead that had been supplied by the Auror Dawlish. That matter was easily dealt with, discarded like so much rubbish despite Yaxley’s persistence. After all, it was Severus who’d killed Dumbledore, advancing the Dark Lord’s ambitions beyond all imagining. That would not be forgotten so easily.

The next order of business was the Ministry, which was on the brink of falling into Voldemort’s hands. Again, no surprise there, nor was Severus shocked when Voldemort made it clear that he intended to dispose of Potter himself. He’d always known it would come to that, even if hearing it confirmed sent a cold chill up his spine.

“I must be the one to kill Harry Potter, and I shall be.”

There was a lull in the conversation, the room growing silent aside from Charity’s soft, rasping breaths as she revolved above the table. Severus risked a glance in her direction, relieved to see that she was still unconscious. If only she could stay that way, unaware of her impending demise, not feeling even a hint of pain when it happened. But that was too much to hope for. The Dark Lord was gazing up at her, too, his lips curving into a sadistic smile.

Now more than ever, Severus could hardly contain his hatred. There was nothing left of the misguided loyalty that had led to him becoming a Death Eater all those years ago, only a single question he’d been asking himself ever since. If it hadn’t been for that fucking prophecy, would he have ever found the courage to renounce his allegiance? He could never be sure now, but he liked to think so.

He remained stoic, trying to ignore the screams that erupted from the cellar below, and then swallowing his pity as Lucius became the Dark Lord’s next target. It was difficult to look at Lucius now. Gone was his haughty demeanor, his pride, a quiet confidence in his own importance. Now there was only humiliated fear, painfully evident in his bowed head and



trembling fingers. But there was forgiveness, too, at least on Severus's part. He hadn't realized the truth until this moment, hadn't recognized the grudge for what it was until it was laid bare by the other man's shame.

True, Severus would've probably become a Death Eater either way. But if not for Lucius's insistence, he wouldn't have been branded so early, wouldn't have been there to overhear that fucking prophecy, wouldn't have...

These thoughts had been so subtle that Severus wasn't even aware of them until he felt them disappear, a low, steady hum abruptly replaced by silence. No, it wasn't Lucius's fault. Like Severus, he'd been drawn in by false promises, unable to resist the temptation of becoming something greater than he was. Lucius might have his shortcomings, his prejudices, aspects of his personality that were downright abhorrent, really. But given the power of hindsight, would he make the same choice again?

Somehow, Severus doubted it.

"Why do the Malfoys look so unhappy with their lot?" the Dark Lord said, as if following the direction of his thoughts. "Is my return, my rise to power, not the very thing they professed to desire for so many years?"

"Of course, my lord," Lucius said hastily, his eyes darting around like a frightened rabbit. "We *did* desire it. We do."

Severus felt nothing but pity... not exactly the safest reaction in the Dark Lord's presence. As such, he was relieved when Bellatrix interrupted, setting herself up as the next target. Unfortunately, he had precious little time to enjoy her discomfort. Voldemort's eyes glittered with malevolence as he spoke, an expression that could only mean one thing. Death.

"I'm talking about your niece, Bellatrix. And yours, Lucius and Narcissa. She has just married the werewolf, Remus Lupin. You must be so proud."

Oh yes, he knew where this was going, as phantom echoes of that horrible portrait reverberated through his mind. "*Blood traitors! Filthy abominations! Desecrating our legacy, casting shame upon the most noble house of Black!*" Indeed, old Mrs. Black would be horrified by this latest development, though of course, that was the least of his concerns.

*Let it be quick*, he thought frantically, even as he maintained the outward appearance of observing the scene with polite interest. *Please, let it be quick.*

"Many of our oldest family trees become a little diseased over time. You must prune yours, must you not, to keep it healthy? Cut away those parts that threaten the health of the rest."

Bellatrix practically pissed herself in her eagerness to win the Dark Lord's approval, but at the moment, Severus couldn't even muster up any contempt for her pathetic behavior. He was too distracted now, his tension mounting, knowing the worst was yet to come.

"We shall cut away the canker that infects us until only those of the true blood remain..." Practically purring now, Voldemort lifted the wand he'd taken from Lucius, pointing it directly at Charity. Severus braced himself, swallowing hard as she came back to consciousness with a pitiful cry. She began to struggle against the invisible bonds, oblivious to her snickering audience.

“Do you recognize our guest, Severus?”

Fucking bastard. Of course he recognized her. Countless greetings at breakfast, at dinner, a woman who'd never passed him in the halls without a kind word or a pleasant smile. Conversations in the staff room, Charity's eyes lighting up with enthusiasm as she'd spoken with the only other professor who knew a thing or two about the Muggle world. To him, those conversations had always seemed trivial. But now?

“Severus! Help me!”

Now, all he wanted was to see those eyes filled with excitement rather than tears.

*Too late, Severus. Too late. There's nothing you can do for her.*

“Ah, yes,” he said aloud, maintaining a disinterested expression as he gazed up at her. This seemed to win the Dark Lord's approval, prompting him to launch into a litany of supposed offenses Charity had committed during her time at Hogwarts. In Voldemort's world, there was no greater crime than tolerance, no sin more grievous than sharing a different point of view.

“Severus, please... please...”

“Silence.” Well, that was a small mercy, even if Severus felt like a coward for the relief that washed over him in the absence of her cries. And in the end, it hardly mattered... his attention was fixed on the Dark Lord now, but he still felt her eyes boring into him, pleading for him to do something, *anything*, to save her from this terrible fate.

“Not content with corrupting and polluting the minds of Wizarding children, last week Professor Burbage wrote an impassioned defense of Mudbloods in the *Daily Prophet*.”

Foolish woman. Hadn't she realized she was signing her own death warrant?

“She would have us all mate with Muggles...”

Severus knew it was coming, felt the Dark Lord's intention as he raised Lucius's wand once more. His disgust was palpable, his impatience clear for all to see. No, there would be no more torture tonight, no prolonging his sadistic satisfaction. He was finished. And therefore, so was his victim.

Unbidden, a memory surfaced in Severus's mind, taking him back to one of his final meetings with Dumbledore.

*“Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?”*

*“Lately, only those whom I could not save.”*

“Avada Kedavra,” the Dark Lord said.

Severus muttered something under his breath, then tried not to wince as Charity fell with a sickening thud. He made himself stare at her body instead, keeping his features impassive as the words became an endless chorus in his mind. *Only those whom I could not save... those whom I could not save...*

“Dinner, Nagini,” Voldemort said. His bloodless lips curled into a satisfied smile as he watched the snake set to work on her meal. Then without warning, he turned to Severus.

“Is everything all right at Hogwarts?”

“Ah, yes, my lord. I have appointed Amycus to serve as our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. As for Alecto...”

“Hmmm... it would appear that a vacancy has just opened up in the Muggle Studies department. Quite fitting for our dear Alecto, wouldn't you agree? I trust that she will institute a more... *appropriate* curriculum.”

“Indeed,” Severus said, swallowing a grimace. “Yes, that should serve very well.”

Voldemort leaned back in his chair, looking pleased. “Since everything appears to be in order, I'd like you to stay with us for the next few days. We need to work on our strategy for next Saturday. And of course, Severus, your presence will be required on that particular mission. I'll need capable wizards at my side, not bumbling fools.”

“Yes, my lord. Of course.”

“Narcissa? Prepare a room for Severus. The rest of you are dismissed.”

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One by one they ascended, like a flock of ravens in the twilight sky. There were more than two dozen of them in all, silent and grim as they set off for Little Whinging.

“Do not fail me.”

The Dark Lord's final words still reverberated in Severus's ears, warning of consequences that would surely come to pass before the night was over. Or at least, he hoped so, because the alternative was unthinkable. He wasn't as privy to Potter's doings as he'd once been, but thanks to Lily, he knew about the Horcruxes, knew Voldemort couldn't be defeated until all of them were destroyed.

Well, all except one, of course.

What the boy needed now, Severus realized, was time. Seven Horcruxes, five of which remained. Or was it four? He'd asked Lily if she knew anything about Potter's outing with Dumbledore on the night of his death. She'd nodded, then had done so again when he'd questioned whether it had anything to do with the Horcruxes. But beyond that, she hadn't known anything.

Two of the remaining Horcruxes were accounted for — Nagini and the boy's scar. That left two more, perhaps three that still must be found and destroyed. Why hadn't Dumbledore bothered to share this information with him? He'd asked himself that question a hundred times, without ever coming to a satisfactory conclusion. If he'd had *something* to work with, even the vaguest clues to point him in the right direction, he could've made his own search, perhaps raised the odds in the boy's favor.

But no... thanks to Dumbledore's unnecessary reticence, the best he could do was try and buy Potter enough time to locate the objects himself.

That thought was at the forefront of his mind as the Death Eaters reached their destination. Whatever happened tonight, there was only one thing he knew for certain. The boy must not

be captured. All of them would suffer as a result of the coming battle. More than a few would probably die. But Potter must not fall, no matter the cost.

“There!” hissed an unidentified voice, and he glanced down to see a small crowd of familiar figures emerging from the house. Of course, seven were identical replicas of one another, forcing him to use his powers of deduction to figure out who they might be. Several of the Weasley children, he was certain, and probably the Granger girl as well. Damn. He’d do his best to protect them all, but it would’ve been helpful to know which was the real Potter.

After the fact, Severus would never remember the battle, at least in terms of logical progression. It would exist as a whirl of chaos in his memory, full of frantic shouts and blinding flashes of light. But he’d recall throwing more than a few of those curses himself, the lives he’d saved, the blood he’d unwittingly spilled in the process.

Most of all, he’d remember Voldemort’s scream ricocheting through the nighttime sky, high pitched and laced with fury. A sound to strike terror in the heart, and yet as sweet as music to his ears. True, it meant retaliation, torture, possibly even death for Severus and the other Death Eaters. But it also meant that not all was lost. The boy had escaped, and would live on to fight another day.

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Severus didn’t know what led him back to the house on 4 Privet Drive. A feeling, an instinct, some last, faint trace of hope? Whatever it was, he couldn’t ignore it.

Still clad in his Death Eater robes, he swept across the lawn, casting a surreptitious glance behind him as he stepped onto the porch. Pointless... this was just an ordinary Muggle neighborhood now that Harry Potter was gone, deserted at such a late hour.

“*Alohomora*,” he murmured, igniting the tip of his wand as he slipped inside. The Dursleys hadn’t been able to take all their belongings, but aside from random bits of furniture and a few odds and ends, the place had been cleaned out.

Up the stairs and then back down again, he methodically searched every room. He opened bare cabinets, poked around in empty dressers, even glanced in a couple of wastebaskets before giving it up as a lost cause. Defeated, he was wondering what to do next when the Dark Mark started to burn.

“Fuck.”

Well, it had only been a matter of time, hadn’t it? He knew what was coming, knew this night couldn’t end without a great deal of pain. Nothing to do but get it over with — his punishment would only be more severe if he put it off.

But just as he reached up to press the Mark, he was struck by the strangest impulse. He glanced at the tiny door beneath the stairs, wondering how he’d missed it and why it suddenly seemed so significant.

And then he remembered... he’d seen it in Potter’s memories, brief glimpses during their Occlumency lessons. The boy had slept there, hadn’t he? Not in recent times, but when he’d

been very young, before his magic had intimidated the Dursleys into giving him a proper bedroom.

Severus opened the door, lifting his wand to illuminate the interior of the cupboard. Just an ordinary storage closet — umbrellas, several pairs of shoes, piles of old magazines. But upon closer inspection, he spotted something peeking out from beneath a tattered blanket.

Kneeling down to retrieve the sack, Severus tried to imagine why Petunia would've left it here of all places. Symbolic, perhaps, but how? Was this a means of expressing her regrets, one final thing she could do for Lily to make up for past failures? Or was it meant to be spiteful, intended to renounce everything having to do with the magical world?

Convincing himself it was the latter, if only to ward off another wave of crushing disappointment, he tugged on the drawstrings, dumping the contents into his open palm.

When he looked down, he saw three small vials... filled to the brim with Petunia's blood.

## 33. The Price of Failure

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### Chapter 33: The Price of Failure

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“Again, Harry Potter slips through my grasp,” Voldemort snarled, glaring down at his prostrate followers. “Again, you pathetic fools allow him to do so.”

“My lord...”

“No, Lucius, do not speak! I will hear no more of your excuses. As for you, Yaxley... *Crucio!* Dolohov, get out from behind that chair. Wretched coward! *Crucio!*”

The drawing room filled with screams, mingled with gasps and ragged sobs. Only Severus remained silent, gritting his teeth as he braced himself for another assault. Thus far, he’d managed to hold himself upright, maintaining control over his spasming muscles through sheer force of will. But then the Dark Lord stalked forward, pointing his wand at his most trusted servant, and all the determination in the world was for nothing.

“*Crucio!*”

Severus went down, suppressing a cry as his knees slammed into the floor. He heard a sickening crack, felt a sliver of bone protruding from his skin, but that was nothing next to the agony that followed. His nerve endings caught fire, scorching him from the inside as he teetered on his knees, still struggling to avoid a full collapse.

“My dear Severus,” Voldemort said, his voice soft and filled with malice. “Dignified as always. No caterwauling, no flimsy excuses or pleas for mercy. Under normal circumstances, I admire that. But tonight of all nights... surely you recognize the enormity of our failure? *Your* failure, to be more precise?”

“Y-yes, my lord.”

“And have you nothing to say for yourself?”

Severus took a deep breath, fighting to control the tremor in his voice. “I am sorry, my lord. If I’d known of the Order’s intention to use Polyjuice...”

“Ah, but you didn’t, did you? Tell me, Severus... what do we do with a wand that has ceased to function properly?”

Swallowing a rush of fear, Severus kept his eyes on the ground. “We cast it aside, my lord.”

“Yes,” said Voldemort, sounding thoughtful. “Likewise, what fate awaits a spy who is no longer able to carry out his duties?”

“Death.”

“Good. Very good. And why is that?”

"A spy knows too many secrets, my lord. If he can no longer remain in his master's service, his life must be forfeit."

"Indeed," Voldemort said, placing his wand under Severus's chin, then tilting it up so their eyes met. "A fact you've understood from the beginning, yes? Yet even now, as you teeter on the brink of death, you don't shrink from it. Any of these other fools would be weeping like children, offering me the world in exchange for their life. But not you, Severus."

"No, my lord," Severus said quietly. "Not me."

The room descended into silence, a deafening hush that was finally broken by a soft moan. Voldemort's head jerked up. "Out!" he commanded. "All of you! I wish to speak with Severus alone."

One by one, the other Death Eaters obeyed, though most of them had to crawl in order to do so. Lucius was the last to leave, shooting Severus a pitying look as the door closed behind him. And then the Dark Lord stepped away, gripping his wand as he began to pace the room.

"So," he said after a minute. "Would you like to speak in your own defense?"

"No, my lord."

"No?" he echoed, turning around with a raised eyebrow. "Why not?"

Severus hesitated, hoping like hell he was playing his cards right. "Because I failed you, my lord. It's your right to choose the manner and severity of my punishment. Attempting to interfere with your judgment would be... disrespectful."

"Disrespectful? Yes, I suppose it would be. Yet surely you don't want to die?"

"No, my lord."

Voldemort nodded, seeming satisfied. "In that case, you'll be relieved to know that I have no intention of killing you. Not tonight. Your past accomplishments merit some measure of clemency, and the fact remains that you have not yet outlived your usefulness."

"Yes, my lord," Severus said, nearly collapsing with relief. "Thank you."

"And yet there must be repercussions, yes? If we do not suffer the consequences of our actions, how can we learn not to repeat them?" Stepping closer, the Dark Lord lifted his wand, eyes glittering with anticipation. "This is for your own good, Severus. You know that, don't you?"

Unable to speak, Severus responded with a jerky nod, bracing himself for the punishment to come.

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He came back to consciousness on a hillside, with no idea how he'd gotten there. All he knew was pain, shuddering through his body in ceaseless waves as he struggled to lift his head. Even that small action was excruciating, battered nerve endings screaming in protest, muscles burning from the strain.

“Fuck,” he groaned, his voice emerging as a hoarse whisper. On top of everything else, his throat was killing him, which seemed odd until he recalled the reason for it.

*“So brave, Severus. So stoic. Tonight, I intend to break that resolve.”*

His body convulsed, phantom echoes of a dozen curses rippling through him.

*“Oh yes... tonight, I will make you scream.”*

Indeed, he remembered now... howls of anguish ripped from his throat, more ragged and filled with desperation as the hours had passed. At first he'd cried out only to satisfy the Dark Lord's whims, but soon enough, he'd reached the point where he couldn't have stopped himself if he'd tried.

Of course, he'd been punished before, but never with such savagery, and certainly not for hours on end. Tortured beyond reason, until it had seemed there were only two ways out: madness or death.

*“Say it, Severus. Beg me to stop, and I will.”*

He'd nearly given in, had almost failed to recognize the deception for what it was. But then he'd understood — to plead for mercy would've only given Voldemort an excuse to punish him even more for his weakness. And so he'd bitten his lip to hold back the words, praying to all the gods he'd never believed in that his suffering would soon be over.

*“No? Well then, let's continue, shall we?”*

Returning to the present, Severus pushed himself up on his elbows, sucking in a sharp breath as he stared down at himself. He was naked, for starters, bare flesh ravaged by an impressive array of curses. A whipping curse? He didn't remember that one, but the evidence was clearly visible on his skin. His chest was striped with angry red lashes, and he didn't need a mirror to know that his back was in a similar condition. No cause for concern there, painful as hell or not. What worried him more were some of the deeper gashes running up and down his torso, several of which were still bleeding.

Yes, the Dark Lord had gone too far, obviously without realizing he'd done so. No doubt he'd assumed Severus would simply drag himself back to Hogwarts, where he'd be in the hands of a skilled mediwitch with a vast array of potions at his disposal. Clearly, it hadn't occurred to him that he'd left Severus in no condition to make it that far.

What the hell was he supposed to do? Apparition was out of the question — he was so weak from blood loss that he could hardly move, let alone rise to his feet and perform a spell that required a clear head and a great deal of power. Nor could he hope to reach his possessions, even though he could see them lying on the ground about a dozen paces away. As it was, even consciousness was more than he could manage, his eyelids growing heavy as his head fell back against the grass.

“Wand,” he muttered, a last, feeble attempt to help himself somehow. *“Accio wand.”*

Nothing happened, though he never noticed as he surrendered to the darkness.



Severus didn't know what had woken him, but he was fairly certain it was the cold. He was shaking violently, almost convulsing, wondering where those strange whimpering sounds were coming from until he identified himself as the source. There was no telling how long he'd been unconscious, though the warm summer afternoon had given way to nightfall, a chill breeze sweeping over him as he shifted onto his side and curled in on himself.

*I'm going to die here*, he thought to himself. But even as he did so, he opened his eyes, immediately spotting the objects lying next to him. There was his wand... yes, and his traveling cloak, too. How was that possible? He could remember summoning one, yes, but not the other... and he certainly didn't recognize what appeared to be a package of food.

Intrigued now, he managed to heave himself up on one elbow, dragging the cloak over his shivering body before reaching out for his wand. As his fingers closed around the familiar length of wood, he let out a sigh, already feeling the tiniest bit of strength returning.

*"Lumos,"* he whispered, then fumbled through his pockets, withdrawing the tiny bundle of potions he'd hidden there. It took a couple tries, but he finally restored it to its proper size, taking a large swig of Blood Replenisher before inspecting the others. Strength Potion, Dittany, a variety of antidotes, and several pain relievers. Not the full arsenal he would've had back at Hogwarts, to be sure, but it was enough.

Next, he turned his attention to the food, frowning when he realized it was Muggle in origin. He'd assumed that Lucius had been the one to help him, a logical assumption, being as he was still on the grounds of Malfoy Manor. But Lucius would've never left *Muggle* food, nor would any of the other Death Eaters have done so, even if they'd suddenly decided to give a shit whether he lived or died.

A mystery to be sure, though he was hardly in any condition to puzzle over it too much. He cast a few perfunctory spells over the bundle, scanning for the most common poisons, then shrugged as he stuffed a hunk of bread in his mouth. Whoever had left it could've easily killed him while he'd been unconscious. Why go to the extra trouble of poisoning him when a simple spell would've finished him off?

Once he'd eaten and taken a little Strength Potion, he set about repairing his shattered knee, then used the bread wrapper to transfigure a garment for himself. It was ridiculous, really, a huge, shapeless thing made of rough black wool. But it was warm, which was all that mattered at that particular moment.

Fighting off another wave of exhaustion, he struggled to his feet with a single purpose in mind. Hogwarts, yes, but first...

"Spinner's End," he muttered, unaware of the eyes that observed him from a distance as he disappeared from sight.

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Lily had started counting on the day of Severus's departure, knocking over a bowl of coins and arranging them to mark each day of his absence. She'd expected there might be three, maybe four by the time he returned, not growing concerned until the morning she'd looked down to see seven sickles lying in a row.

She'd started the second row with a great deal of trepidation, then begun the third with a heart full of fear. And now that she was on the fourth, she could only assume the worst. Nearly a month now without a word, only an ominous silence that seemed to grow ever more oppressive by the day.

To make matters worse, she'd overheard a snatch of conversation between the Carrows one night, picking up on the words "Severus" and "terrible punishment" before they'd abruptly changed topics. Nothing since, though she'd taken to following them day and night, hoping to learn what had happened to him. More importantly, hoping it wasn't as bad as it seemed.

She would've gone to look for him herself, but knew that to be a useless endeavor. His failure to return was directly connected with Voldemort, after all, and though she knew that Malfoy Manor served as Voldemort's headquarters, locating the place was another matter entirely. Like Grimmauld Place, it was undetectable to anyone who hadn't been granted access.

And so she waited, pacing the castle from top to bottom, desperate for even the slightest tidbit of news. She refused to make alternate plans, refused to even consider what she should do if she was left to face the future alone. No, not yet... not until she knew for certain that he wasn't coming back.

*Please*, she thought to herself as she fell asleep on the 26th night. *Please, just let him be alive.*

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Lily awoke with a start, her ears picking up on the sound of soft footsteps, followed by a whisper of, "*Lumos*." And just like that, Severus was there, slipping off his cloak as he stepped forward to greet her. She didn't have to wonder where he'd been — to hell and back, by the looks of it. He was thinner than she'd ever seen him, gaunt features standing out in sharp relief amongst the shadows. There was a haunted look in his eyes, a stiffness in his movements as he lowered himself onto the bed. But then he smiled, reaching out a tentative hand, and nothing else mattered.

"I was delayed," he said quietly. "Forgive me... it could not be helped."

What she wouldn't have given to take him in her arms, cover his face with kisses, press her face against his neck and weep out of sheer relief. Unfortunately, none of that was possible, so she did the best she could under the circumstances. She leapt into his lap, purring for all she was worth as he leaned forward and cradled her against his chest.

"Lily..."

*Severus, I love you.*

She couldn't say it, of course, but hoped he felt it somehow.

He held her for what seemed like hours, giving her what was obviously a modified version of events. He spoke of Harry, explaining how Voldemort's plans had been thwarted and that Harry was now safely in hiding. She'd gathered that much from what she'd overheard around the castle, which was why her worries for her son had been more manageable than her anxiety

over Severus. But she felt terrible when she realized that the punishment Severus had endured was directly related to his efforts on Harry's behalf.

That in the end, as always, he'd suffered for her sake.

He said little about it, only briefly mentioning Voldemort's displeasure before abruptly changing topics. But certain movements clearly pained him, and he didn't undress until the lights had been fully extinguished. He'd obviously forgotten that as a cat, her visual capabilities were far more advanced than his own.

Again, she wanted to cry, horrified as she began to understand the full extent of what he'd been through. His wounds were partially healed, but even so, it was obvious that he'd been tortured beyond comprehension, to the point that it was miraculous he'd survived at all. She wished she could do something to comfort him, that she could tell him how sorry she was that he'd endured so much pain. But between her limitations and his insistence on hiding the truth, that wasn't possible.

Well, she could at least make sure he wasn't alone. And perhaps after all, that was what he needed more than anything else.

When he slipped beneath the covers, she curled up next to him, laying her head on his chest. For several long moments, the room was silent, his long fingers stroking her back until they gradually slowed and grew still. Assuming he'd fallen asleep, she was startled when he spoke again.

"Lily? There's something else... something I haven't told you." He hesitated, taking a deep breath. "I don't want to make any promises, but I think I've found a way to break the charm. In fact, I'm almost certain of it."

She lifted her head, staring down at him in surprise. Since the last potion had failed, she'd assumed any search for another solution was on hold for the time being, as the pressure mounted and his responsibilities grew more demanding by the day. But it seemed that once again, she'd underestimated him.

"During my absence, I was able to procure the final ingredient. We can begin our experiments tomorrow."

## 34. Quiet Desperation

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### Chapter 34: Quiet Desperation

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Having assumed they were heading for Severus's Potions lab, Lily was surprised when he led her outside instead.

"Necessary," he told her in a hushed voice, then said no more as he strode toward the Forbidden Forest.

Since the students weren't due for at least another week, the grounds were deserted. But as they approached the perimeter of the forest, a familiar figure emerged from the trees, stopping in his tracks when he spotted Severus. His features changed, twisting in disgust before he managed a more neutral expression.

"Snape," he said stiffly.

"Hagrid," Severus responded, and Lily saw a flash of hurt in his eyes in response to the cold reception, for all that he must've been expecting it. "Tell me: have you been reading the Prophet lately?"

"Every day."

"Then surely you are aware that I am now headmaster at this school?"

Hagrid jerked his head in response.

"Yes? Well then, you will address me as such."

Severus stepped away, then froze as Hagrid muttered something under his breath. "What was that?"

"Ah, nothing."

"Nothing? Perhaps my ears are failing me, but I distinctly heard the word 'traitor'. Is that what you think I am, Hagrid?" There was no trace of vulnerability in his eyes now, not even a hint of emotion. His stare was hard and unyielding as he waited for a response.

"Don't need me to tell you what ye are."

"No, I don't," Severus agreed with a humorless smirk. "I'd suggest you remember that if you wish to remain employed at this school."

"All right."

"And you *will* address me as..."

"Yes," Hagrid said, gritting his teeth. "Headmaster."

Severus turned away once more, looking disgusted with himself as he tramped into the forest. But the unpleasant scene was soon forgotten as they made their way deeper into the trees, walking for what seemed like hours before he finally came to a standstill. They were standing in front of a profusion of undergrowth, so thick it seemed impenetrable. But then he murmured a spell and ropes of ivy parted like curtains, revealing a small meadow with a cauldron positioned directly at the center.

The thing was massive, large enough to hold a fully grown human and then some. Below it was a pile of kindling and within, a pale blue potion that glittered beneath the morning sunlight.

Seeming nervous all of a sudden, Severus stepped forward to inspect the cauldron's contents, then nodded. "The base is ready. All that remains are the final ingredients. I..." He paused, taking a deep breath. "I can't predict the results. Not for certain. But I can promise that you'll come to no harm. Do you trust me, Lily?"

She bobbed her head in response.

"Good. That's good. Very well then... shall we get started?"

Curious, not to mention a bit nervous herself, Lily watched as Severus reached into his robes, withdrawing a tiny vial of blood. He poured it into the cauldron, then stepped back and pointed his wand at the kindling. Once the fire was fully ablaze, the potion began to bubble, growing darker by slow degrees as he retrieved a knife from his pocket.

The action was so swift that she didn't realize what was happening until it was done. A flash of metal, and then he was standing beside the cauldron, looking pale as his blood dripped into the simmering liquid. He hadn't mentioned this part beforehand, but of course, he wouldn't have, knowing how she'd react. She would've tried to stop him, or at least begged him to put it off until he was fully recovered from his recent ordeal. And while she might not have won the argument with plastic letters, she could've easily disappeared, refusing to take part in the ritual.

Well, too late for that. It was done now.

"Lily?" he said, sounding slightly shaky as he extinguished the fire. "It's time. Are you ready?"

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Severus picked up the cat, holding his breath as he approached the cauldron. She stayed perfectly still, not even tensing as he lowered her into the potion, immersing her entirely until only her head was above the surface. It was a testament to the level of trust she had in him, which left him in awe. Now more than ever, he wanted to be worthy of that trust, couldn't bear the thought of failing her yet again.

For several moments, nothing happened. Only a massive wall of fog emanated from the cauldron, though he'd anticipated that. It was his primary reason for needing to do this outdoors.

But then the cat screeched, hurling itself out of the cauldron and racing away. Startled, Severus watched it go, then turned back and squinted to see through the mist.

Slowly, it rose out of the potion... not the figure of a woman, but a shapeless mass, nearly transparent beneath a ray of sunlight. It hovered in the air, twisting and turning as if trying to shape itself into some definite form. And then he heard it, a faint, distant echo on the morning breeze.

“Severus...”

It was Lily and yet not, a cadence he remembered so well, yet too insubstantial to be human.

“Lily?”

*“What happened? I... I can’t feel my body. I can’t see...”*

The voice was growing fainter by the second, her presence fading into the mist. “Lily?” Severus said, bewilderment swiftly replaced by panic. “Lily, hold on. Stay with me, please! I’ll figure this out, try something else, I’ll...”

“Severus...” One final whisper, softer than the rustling of leaves above his head. And then she was gone.

---

Severus didn’t move. Not for hours. He stayed on his knees beside the cauldron as the sun rose high overhead and slowly made its descent, never moving as afternoon gave way to nightfall. From time to time, he called out to her, torn between broken whispers and frantic shouts. There was no response, though deep down, he hadn’t expected one. He already knew the truth, even if that truth was still buried beneath a mountain of denial.

That mountain crumbled in the cold light of dawn, his body shaking with silent sobs as he struggled to push himself to his feet. It was a monumental effort, leaving him sprawled in the dirt several times before he finally managed to heave himself up, leaning heavily against the cauldron. He then knew that it was Lily who’d sustained him, Lily who’d made him feel far more recovered than he actually was. When she’d gone, she’d taken that strength with her, along with his sense of purpose and will to survive.

What was left? Only pain.

Pain, along with the terrible realization that he must’ve been the only man in history who’d managed to kill the woman he loved not once, but twice.

Never before had he wanted so much to lay down and die. And why not? No one could find him here, and he was already weak from hunger and blood loss. Or perhaps he’d be summoned before he wasted away, could muster up a last bit of strength to stand before the Dark Lord and reveal the truth of his loyalties. Why should he care if he was tortured? He wouldn’t survive much of it in his current state. And after that? Sweet oblivion.

But thoughts of Voldemort reminded him of a different purpose, a vow made in what seemed like another lifetime.

It was that promise that kept him on his feet, giving him the strength he needed to make it the short distance to the Apparition point. He wasn’t ready to go back up to the castle just yet, even if he could’ve made it that far. Maintaining his cover in front of the Carrows,

intimidating the other teachers into submission? Beyond his capabilities at the moment. He needed a place to hole up for a few days, fortifying himself with food, rest, and potions until he regained a bit of strength. And preferably, somewhere where he could be alone.

Closing his eyes, he opened them again to find himself at Spinner's End.

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If nothing else, Severus knew how to take care of himself. That was why, after forcing himself to choke down a large meal and dosing himself with several key potions, he spent the first couple days in a state of unconsciousness. Rest, more than anything, was what his body needed to heal. The fact that it kept him from dwelling on Lily just happened to be an added benefit.

When he rose on the third day, he felt a little stronger, drawing on the full power of his Occlumency to keep his grief at bay. He focused on the task at hand, which of course, involved determining the current status of the war and the whereabouts of Potter and his friends. Fortunately, it seemed the boy was in hiding for now. But soon enough, he'd have no choice but to begin his hunt for the Horcruxes. How did he intend to elude capture? Would other Order members assist him, or did this all come down to a trio of teenagers?

The entire situation was maddening, particularly now that Severus was no longer privy to inside information. Not for the first time, he wondered if turning traitor had been the right choice. Without Dumbledore around, thwarting his efforts at every turn, there was no telling what he might've been able to do to help the boy.

Too late now, perhaps, which was doubly tragic in his current state of mind. He was so tired of the deception, sick to death of all the lies. Maybe this was the inevitable result of losing Lily... of once again being severed from the only person who'd seen him for who he truly was. Of course, Potter would never know him to that degree. Severus couldn't even imagine such a thing. But to be seen as an ally rather than an enemy, met with grudging respect rather than hatred...

Now, more isolated than he'd ever been, Severus couldn't think of anything he would've welcomed more.

That was the thought that led him to Grimmauld Place, bypassing Moody's silly jinxes with ease. The Tongue-Tying Curse was amusing, attempting to force him to keep a secret he already guarded with his life. But that was nothing next to the figure that rose from the carpet, formed entirely of dust. It flew toward him, pointing an accusing finger in his direction.

"You know why I killed you," he said dryly. "Enough with the theatrics."

At the word "kill", the figure exploded, leaving a giant cloud of dust in its wake.

In truth, Severus had no idea what to do next. Gaining access had been his first goal, after which he'd expected to find the place deserted. But a quick *Homenum revelio* proved that wasn't the case, showing three distinct presences in the drawing room. He drew back into the shadows and watched the markers for a while, their lack of movement making it clear that the trio was asleep. A peek into the drawing room confirmed this assumption, leaving him staring down at their sleeping bags with a queer feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He couldn't recall these children ever looking so innocent, huddled together with their faces relaxed in slumber. Children indeed, lost and frightened, far too young to have such heavy burdens laid on their shoulders. Six years of dislike couldn't change that realization, didn't overcome the powerful urge to protect them. He'd felt that way all along, of course, but had never examined it too closely until now. He wanted to keep them safe... not just to win the war, not only to fulfill a promise. No, he wanted it for the simple fact that they deserved to live.

As such, it was distressing to know that they might not survive, that there was little he could do to save them.

One, at least, was already doomed.

Well, if nothing else, that was the one consolation in losing Lily. At least she'd never known the truth, had never realized that her son would have to die. Small comfort, perhaps, but it was better than nothing.

In Lily's case, withholding information had been for the best. But what about Potter? Would it be better to tell him that his mother had survived for so many years, or leave him believing what he'd been told all his life? More importantly, what would *Lily* have wanted?

Severus headed upstairs and slipped into Sirius's bedroom, scanning his surroundings for quill and parchment. At first glance, he didn't see either, striding over to the desk and carelessly tossing books and papers aside until he finally found what he was looking for. But when he picked up the clean sheet of parchment, he spotted something beneath that made him freeze.

*One year old and already zooming along on a toy broomstick, he looked so pleased with himself...*

It wasn't the words that caught his attention, but the handwriting, achingly familiar though he hadn't seen it in more than twenty years.

*I'm enclosing a picture so you can see.*

A quick *Muffliato* and he tore the room apart, searching through papers like a man possessed. He didn't even notice when his shields started to crumble, too intent on the desperate need to see her face just one last time. Of course, she might not have even been in the picture she mentioned in the letter, but there could be others, couldn't there?

And then he sank back on his heels, letting out a sob as he stared down at the prize in his hand. It was a photograph of Lily, even more beautiful than he remembered, her youthful face lit up with laughter. He was weeping openly now, his body heaving, choked sounds emerging from deep in his chest as he was hit by the full force of his grief. Everything he'd lost... how close he'd come to bringing her back before losing her all over again.

The sheer force of his agony seemed as if it would tear him asunder. But even then, it was Lily who held him together somehow, sustaining him with the light in her eyes and two simple words.

*Love, Lily*

He clung to those words like a lifeline, tracing them with the tip of his finger as he read the final page of her letter. Maybe they hadn't been written for him, but deep down, he knew



she'd loved him. From the time they were children up until the end, she'd loved him. Only as a friend, perhaps, certainly not in the way he'd always longed for with such intensity. But she'd *loved* him.

"Fuck, Lily," he whispered as he returned his attention to her laughing face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Yet even in his grief, he felt comforted somehow, a little less alone. That could be credited to the picture, no doubt... Wizarding photographs held a special kind of magic, retaining the essence of their subject years after they'd been taken. It had been the better part of two decades, and he could still feel her warmth, could hear an echo of her laughter in the silent room. It was as if this picture, this precious image, had managed to copy a part of her soul.

He wasn't prepared for the realization when it hit him, nor the enormity of what it meant. True, it was just a theory, but somehow he knew it was the correct one.

Oh yes, he knew. Unfortunately, it was far too late to do anything about it.

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She stepped out of the woods, a sleek, elegant doe with liquid brown eyes. It was unusual for deer to leave the forest, but of course, this was no ordinary doe. Inside was the soul of a woman... one who happened to be the embodiment of the creature she possessed.

For four days now, she'd been waiting, hovering near the Apparition point as she waited for him to appear. She knew him better than anyone, understood that he'd gone off to grieve in private.

But of course, there was no need for that. She was very much alive, and couldn't wait to tell him so.

In the meantime, the waiting was terrible, as was recalling the aftermath of his attempt to bring her back. It hadn't been painful, just disconcerting as her soul had struggled to reform itself as a solid being. A strange detachment, and then a swift weakening as she'd suffered the loss of any physical form. After all, body and soul were made to exist as one being, each suffering severe limitations without the other. She'd felt herself fading, floating away, and then she'd known what to do.

Transferring herself to the squirrel had been easy. Realizing she was unable to enter the hiding place thanks to Severus's powerful wards? Not so much. She'd waited just outside, praying for him to emerge soon, helpless to respond to his frantic calls. And then late that night, struck by what was literally a soul deep exhaustion, she'd drifted off to sleep.

She'd awoken to bright morning sunlight, followed by an absolute silence that told her he was gone.

Following that, she'd searched the grounds and then the castle, despite knowing that she wouldn't find him there. Pointless, to be sure, but at it had been something to do while awaiting his return.

Yes, he *would* come back. The alternative was unthinkable.

And then on the fifth day, Lily was awoken by a pop, opening her eyes to find Severus standing right in front of her. He looked terrible with his gaunt features, his stringy hair and several days worth of stubble. But to Lily in that moment, it was hard to imagine a more beautiful sight.

Without hesitation, she stepped forward to greet him.

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“What are you doing out of the woods?” Severus said tiredly. “I don’t have any food if that’s what you’re after.”

He tried to continue on his way, but the doe stepped right in his path, effectively blocking his progress. A turn in the opposite direction and she did the same thing, bold enough this time to nudge him in the stomach with her long nose. Perhaps exhaustion had dulled his senses, because the thought didn’t even occur to him until she stood in his way a third time. Or maybe he was afraid to hope anymore. At this point, another disappointment would surely kill him.

But after the fourth attempt, he had to ask.

“Lily?”

The deer bobbed her head.

Still gutted by grief, Severus wasn’t willing to take any chances. “If... if you *are* Lily, flick your ears three times, then walk in a circle.”

The head bob could’ve been a coincidence, but the latter was far too precise to be mistaken. And when she did so, coming back to stand before him with an expression as close to exasperation as a deer could manage, he was dumbfounded, silent for several moments as he struggled to get his bearings.

“How is this possible? I thought you were... dead. When you disappeared, I just assumed...” He paused, taking a deep breath. “I should’ve guessed, perhaps, but it really *did* seem... Well, nevermind. Are you hurt? Did the potion injure you, or cause you any pain?”

She shook her head and he sighed in relief, then cast a quick glance behind him. “Let’s go back into the woods then, shall we?”

They returned to the hiding place, with Severus still reeling from the dizzying highs and catastrophic lows of the past few days. With a great deal of effort, he shielded himself, determined to focus on the task at hand. Lily would live on regardless, which was a comfort. But this was to be his final attempt, his last chance to bring her back as the beautiful, laughing woman in the photograph that was tucked inside his robes right next to his heart.

The photograph... the last, most crucial ingredient he hadn’t realized he’d needed until he’d held it in his hands.

He had to make a trip up to the castle to gather the base ingredients, but that was no trouble at all. Knowing that Lily was alive, it was as if his feet had developed wings, carrying him up to his quarters and back down again, until he stood before the massive cauldron once

more. He made quick work of adding the necessary herbs, pouring the last vial of Petunia's blood into the mixture before adding his own.

And then he took out the photograph, glad that he'd thought to make a copy as he dropped it into the simmering liquid. He then turned to Lily, who'd transferred to a rabbit during his brief absence.

"Ready?" he said quietly.

He scooped her into his arms, lowering her carefully into the potion. A moment, a heartbeat, a breath, all of which seemed to last an eternity. And then he saw her, a shapely figure barely visible in the mist as she rose from the cauldron. She held out a hand for him to help her out and he could only stare at it, utterly stunned by the sight of her pale, delicate fingers.

It was then that he recognized the truth. Despite all his wildest hopes, all the years he'd had her beside him in animal form, there'd been some small part of him that had insisted it was all a lie, that it was far too good to be true. That part of him had never completely believed in her return, the same part that had never quite recovered from the loss of her. He'd clung to her presence with a quiet, desperate hope, but that was rather different than accepting it as reality.

But now...

Now it was like awakening from a dream as he reached out and took her hand, so warm and human, so utterly, perfectly real. She stepped out of the cauldron, then stood before him in all her glory, red hair aflame in the morning sunlight, eyes more green than the foliage that surrounded her.

Those eyes filled with tears as she lifted her head to gaze up at him.

"Did it work?" she whispered, and then he realized she hadn't looked down at her body, understood she was afraid to do so.

"Yes, Lily," he choked out as he pulled her into his arms. "It worked."

## 35. Immediate Dilemmas

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### Chapter 35: Immediate Dilemmas

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Stunned, Lily clung to Severus as an onslaught of sensations slammed into her all at once. As many times as she'd dreamed of being human again, nothing could have prepared her for the reality of this moment. Her eyesight might've been sharper in other forms, her hearing more keen or sense of smell more acute. But none of that had ever come close to what she was feeling now, a depth and intensity she hadn't experienced in nearly two decades.

Closing her eyes, she pressed her face against Severus's chest, feeling his heart pounding in perfect rhythm with her own. She knew she should put some distance between them, that she needed space to bring her emotions under control. But she only held him tighter, afraid that if she let go even for a second, her legs would give out beneath her. She didn't know why she felt so shaky, nor why her muscles were already burning with exertion. It hardly seemed to matter under the circumstances though, a minor footnote compared with everything else.

"Lily?" Severus said, his voice emerging as a harsh whisper. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I... I think so."

"You're crying."

"Am I?" She pulled back a little, surprised to see a wet spot on the front of his traveling cloak. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm just... overwhelmed, I guess."

"Of course you are." He paused, and she felt him swallow hard. "What I mean is, are you feeling any ill effects? Any pain?"

Shaking her head, she decided not to mention the weakness. "I'm fine. A little cold, perhaps."

"Yes, I'd imagine so." He took a step back, averting his eyes as she glanced down at her naked body.

"Oh..." she said, blushing deeply.

"Don't worry. I... ah, didn't see anything." He jerked his head at the thick cloud of mist that still surrounded them, then released her arms as he reached up to unfasten his cloak. "Here. This will keep you warm until we find more suitable garments. I'm sure I'll be able to transfigure something as soon as we..."

But Lily wasn't listening anymore. She teetered precariously, struggling to hold herself upright without his support. "Sev... I can't..."

"Lily? Shit!"

She felt a pair of strong arms catch her as she crumpled to the ground, and then the world went black.

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Cursing under his breath, Severus wrapped Lily in his cloak, then lowered her onto the grass. His initial diagnostic charms were reassuring — all her vital signs were stable, and there was no evidence of trauma. She was quite pale, her skin almost translucent, and she was rather too thin for his liking. But additional tests shed light on both these concerns, indicating severe exhaustion along with a swiftly advancing case of malnutrition.

Severus let out a long, shuddering sigh as he sank back on his heels. Of course she was exhausted. Who wouldn't be after what she'd been through? But the malnutrition took him by surprise, since she'd only been human for perhaps half an hour.

For a moment, he just sat there, reaching out with shaking fingers to trace the contours of her face. It still seemed like a dream, as if he might wake up at any moment to the bitter realization that she'd been dead all along. But there was no denying the warmth of her skin, the flutter of her pulse against his fingertips or the whisper of her breath in the otherwise silent clearing. Yes, she was very much alive... and for the moment, depending on him to keep her that way.

With that realization, he forced his brain into overdrive, pushing back against a tangle of intense, overwhelming emotion and replacing it with logical thought. Malnutrition. What was the cause? More importantly, why had it developed at such a rapid pace?

When the answer hit him, it seemed so obvious that he couldn't believe he'd failed to recognize it sooner. True, she'd only been human for a short time, but where had she drawn her energy from? She'd never consumed a single morsel of food in her current form. As such, she'd had nothing to sustain her, no crucial stores of nutrients to keep her body functioning properly. She'd probably absorbed a little sustenance from the blood contained in the potion, but that had only kept her going for a matter of minutes. Now she was wasting away right before his eyes.

An alarming situation, to say the least, sending him into a state of near panic as he rose to his feet.

Leaving Lily alone in the Forbidden Forest, helpless in her unconscious state, went against all his instincts. But there was no choice in the matter, and so he shielded her with an extra set of wards before making his way up to the castle. He raced through the halls like he had a horde of Inferi on his heels, bursting into the kitchens and barking a series of orders at the house elves. At least they had the sense not to question his erratic behavior. The same couldn't be said for Madame Pomfrey, who had the audacity to interrupt him as he plundered through the cabinets in the hospital wing.

"Severus? What are you doing?"

"Where are the Nutrient Potions?" he snapped, too distracted to remind her that she should address him by his proper title.

"Why are you looking for...?"

“That’s none of your concern. I need Nutrient Potions. Several, at least. And let’s see... Blood Replenisher, Strength Potion, perhaps some Dreamless Sleep...”

Poppy moved closer, staring up at him with that barely concealed loathing that had become all too familiar since Dumbledore’s death. “The students are returning the day after tomorrow, and we’re already running low on most of our stores. They’re usually replenished throughout the summer, but I suppose our regular supplier has been too busy...”

“For fuck’s sake, woman! Yes, *I’m* the one who brews your damn potions. Trust me when I say you’ll have plenty more as soon as I have the opportunity to make them. For now, I’d suggest you help me find what I need... unless you’d like me to find another Mediwitch to fill your position?”

Poppy clamped her mouth shut, her eyes blazing as she dug around in the cabinets. Withdrawing several vials, she shoved them into his hands, then turned and stalked away. Severus was beyond caring about her hostile attitude, even when he distinctly heard her mutter the word “murderer” under her breath. All that mattered were the precious potions, which he tucked in his pockets before making a quick trip up to his quarters.

Soon enough, he was back out on the grounds, plunging into the thick undergrowth of the Forbidden Forest just as the sun sank beneath the trees. Lily looked much the same as she had when he’d left her, though a trifle more pale. He ignited the tip of his wand to examine her face, then reached into his pockets, determined to make sure she was as warm as possible. The evening air was brisk rather than frigid, though he was still concerned to see that she was shivering beneath his cloak. He enlarged a couple blankets and draped them over her, then cast a couple warming charms for good measure before lighting a small fire.

Uncorking one of the vials, he slid an arm behind her neck, tilting her head up before slipping a finger between her lips. He tried not to think about how soft they were as he tipped the contents into her mouth, doing his best to focus on the task at hand. Dosing her with plenty of Nutrient Potion and a bit of Blood Replenisher, he followed up with a good amount of water. The last thing she needed was to become dehydrated on top of everything else.

And then there was nothing to do but wait, watching for any change in her condition as the night deepened around them. At first, he saw nothing, terrified that his ministrations wouldn’t be enough. But when he performed the diagnostics again, he sighed in relief as he noted that the signs of malnutrition weren’t quite as pronounced as they’d been before. And then the tiniest bit of color crept back into her cheeks, her unconsciousness shifting into what appeared to be a natural sleep.

“Thank you,” he breathed, gradually becoming aware of his own exhaustion as the tension drained from his body. He couldn’t recall ever having been so tired, but it was worth it. Sweet Merlin, was it worth it.

Stretching out on the grass, he stared at Lily’s face in wonder, never realizing his own was streaked with tears as he drifted off to sleep.

---

Lily awoke with a start, blinking in confusion as she scanned her surroundings. She was in a clearing of some sort, surrounded by thick, lush undergrowth, with the largest cauldron

she'd ever seen positioned directly at the center. It seemed familiar somehow, like pieces of a dream she couldn't quite remember. But it wasn't until her eyes fell upon the man lying a few feet away that it all came rushing back.

Severus was deeply asleep, signs of weariness etched into his already harsh profile. He was curled up on his side, his head pillowed on one arm and the other extended in her direction, almost as if he'd been reaching out for her.

*Oh, Severus...*

Deciding not to wake him, Lily took a deep breath and pushed herself into a sitting position. She blushed in response to the impulse that followed, but she couldn't help herself. Another quick glance at Severus to make sure he was still asleep, and then she reached beneath the blankets, running her hands down her thighs and across her stomach before moving them up to explore her breasts.

Yes, they were definitely real, soft and full, just the way she remembered. But she'd forgotten their sensitivity, how the lightest touch could send the most delicious shivers up her spine. She caressed them for a while, sighing in pleasure, one hand sliding lower until she realized what she was doing and yanked it away with a flush of embarrassment.

Impulse control. Yes, that was definitely something she needed to work on now that she was human again. Human... she could scarcely believe it as she held a hand up in front of her face, examining the small, tapered fingers. Next, she marveled over her hair, sliding across her palms like silk as it glinted in the morning sunlight.

She'd just pulled the blankets up to examine her feet when she heard a low groan.

"Lily," Severus said, his voice still husky from sleep. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better," she said, flashing him a reassuring smile. "What happened?"

He sat up, wincing as he stretched the arm that had been trapped behind his head. "You don't remember?"

"I just remember feeling extremely tired all of a sudden. Weak, I suppose. And then I'm not sure, but I must have fallen asleep."

He nodded. "You fainted. Exhaustion, mostly, but you were also undernourished. Only to be expected, though I'm sorry I wasn't more prepared."

"No need to apologize. So you...?"

"I procured some Nutrient Potions, yes. Blood Replenisher. I treated you while you were unconscious."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"You feel better? Truly?" He moved closer, gripping his wand in one hand as he scrutinized her face.

"Yes. Still a little shaky, perhaps, but better."

"Good. Well, now that you're awake, you'll need more than potions. Food and lots of it, which fortunately, I happen to have."

He got to his feet, his movements filled with restless energy as he withdrew several packages from his robes. Soon enough, he'd enlarged them and removed the Stasis Charm, warming the food with a flick of his wand before conjuring a pair of goblets and filling them with water.

"Best I can do under the circumstances."

"This is wonderful!" she said, staring down at the impressive spread. "Treacle tart? It was always my favorite, you know."

"I know." A hint of sadness flickered behind his eyes as he settled himself on the ground again. "I remember."

Needing no encouragement, Lily dove into the food, treating herself to a large helping of roast beef before turning her attention to the boiled potatoes. "I'd forgotten how good food could taste," she told him, tearing off a piece of freshly baked bread and stuffing it into her mouth.

His lips twitched. "I can see that. You might want to pace yourself though. Vomiting is another aspect of humanity that isn't quite so enjoyable."

She nodded, feeling a little embarrassed as she forced herself to slow down. "Severus?"

"Yes, Lily?"

"What are we going to do?"

He hesitated, letting out a heavy sigh. "Honestly? I don't know. Up until yesterday, I hardly thought this was possible. I certainly wasn't presumptuous enough to make any further plans."

"I know," she said quietly.

"And with the war, and..."

"You're under a lot of pressure. I know that, Severus. Better than anyone. If you want me to go..."

"What?!" He stared at her, looking stunned. "Lily, what are you talking about? Go where?"

"I don't know. It's just that you've done so much for me already. I don't want to be any trouble."

"Lily, look at me." When she did, he stared into her eyes for a long moment, then said, "It's true. My life is full of complications, more trouble than I know how to deal with. But to think you might fall into that category, that I could *ever*..."

"But..."

He held up a hand to stop her. "Besides, it doesn't matter. Not yet. What you need is time to recover, along with a safe place to do so. I can give you that, at least. As for the rest, I suppose we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

She knew he was right — she wasn't in any condition to make plans just yet. The potions he'd given her had helped, along with the food she'd just eaten. But she was already feeling



tired again, and as much as she would've liked to believe otherwise, she couldn't be sure her legs would even hold her if she tried to stand. And then there was the fact that she didn't have a wand, that she might not even be capable of performing magic even if she did. No, staying with Severus was her only option right now... not that she had any complaints.

"Okay," she said, flashing him a small smile. "Yes, that makes sense."

He nodded, apparently satisfied. "Our only immediate concern is figuring out how to get you back up to the castle without being seen. The students will be returning tomorrow, so we'll have to find a way to do it tonight."

"How are we supposed to manage that?"

He smiled, though there was no humor behind the expression. "Don't worry. I have a plan."

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Severus woke Lily just after midnight, bringing her back to consciousness with a soft whisper.

"Lily? Lily, wake up. It's time."

"Already?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, but we can't afford to wait any longer."

"All right," she mumbled, sounding far too weary for his liking. "What do I need to do?"

"I want you to take these potions. One swig of each should do it."

She sat up, squinting her eyes in the moonlight. "Nutrient and Blood Replenisher. What's the third?"

"Strength potion. I'm not giving you the other one just yet."

"Okay." She accepted the vials, tipping her head back as she swallowed each of them in turn.

"Now," Severus said after a few minutes had passed. "Do you feel ready to try?"

"Yes."

He held out his hand, relieved to feel some measure of strength in her grip as he helped her to her feet. As hard as it was, he forced himself to release her, watching nervously as she stood on her own in the middle of the clearing.

"Can you walk?"

"I think so. Let's see..."

Gingerly, she took one step and then another, seeming much more steady as she tried a couple more. She turned around, flashing him a brilliant smile that made his heart race as she nodded.

"Yes, I can walk."

“Far enough to make it back up to the castle?”

“I believe so.”

Hoping she was right, Severus reached into his pocket and withdrew the final vial. “I wish I didn’t have to ask you to do this. You’ve waited so long to be yourself again, and...”

“It’s only for an hour, right?”

“Right,” he agreed, still uncertain about this plan. Unfortunately, it was the best he could do on such short notice. A Disillusionment Charm would’ve been preferable, since he would’ve at least had the comfort of supporting her during the walk. But such charms were far from infallible. There was always a chance that someone might see her, or worse, recognize her for who she was. He could always deny it, of course, but the rumors alone could be damaging, even fatal at this late stage in his career. And once the Dark Lord heard of it...

“Well, let’s get it over with,” Lily said.

“Do you remember what I told you?”

“Yes. If anyone tries to talk to me, just tell them I’m retiring for the evening and will speak with them in the morning.”

“And if you can’t make it to my quarters?”

Her expression turned stubborn. “I will.”

“Lily...”

“Fine. I’ll call the house elf. I’ll tell him I’m not feeling well and ask him to Apparate me directly to your office.”

“And his name is...?”

“Mosley.”

Severus nodded in satisfaction. “Ideally, that won’t be necessary. I trust the house elves, more than all the others combined. But if Mosley realized something was off about you...”

“I know. I’ll be fine, Severus. Promise.”

“All right.” He winced as he plucked several strands of hair from his head. Dropping them into the vial, he watched as it transformed to a deep plum color, then handed it to her. “I still can’t believe you’re agreeing to this. I’ll probably be the foulest thing you’ve ever tasted.”

Tilting her head back, Lily downed the Polyjuice in one swallow, then smiled. “Not bad, actually,” she said. “Like mulled spices... maybe a bit of licorice... oh!”

He turned his back when she started to transform, refusing to watch as her beautiful features melted into his own ugly visage. Such an atrocity, but at least it would be over soon.

“Interesting,” she said in a fair imitation of his silky drawl. “I feel very... *imposing*. Twenty points from Slytherin, you insufferable fool!”

“Very amusing,” Severus responded dryly. “Now off with you.”

“All right.” He heard a low chuckle, followed by the sound of his own footsteps as she walked away.

## 36. Doppelganger

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### Chapter 36: Doppelganger

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Lily hurried through the entrance hall, maintaining a purposeful stride as she headed for the stairs. She could only imagine the spectacle she was making with his black robes billowing behind her, smiling to herself as she imitated his trademark scowl. Yes, impersonating Severus was easier than she'd thought it would be, though she still hoped to make it to his office without being seen.

The castle was dimly lit, pervaded by an unnatural stillness that sent a shiver up her spine as she ascended the stairs. No hint of noise, not a breath of movement... even the portraits showed no signs of life as she passed, as if they'd somehow been replaced by their Muggle counterparts. Such was Hogwarts without its students in residence — a cold, hollow place, an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

"Snape?"

Lily jumped, whipping her head around to peer into a nearby alcove. "Who's there?"

"Me," a man's voice rasped as a shadow separated itself from the wall, stepping out into the faint torchlight. She immediately recognized him as one of the Carrows, though she couldn't remember his name. Alec? Alex?

Suppressing a twinge of panic, she looked down her nose at him. "I am your headmaster. You will address me as such."

"Of course," the man said, looking flustered. "Forgive me, Headmaster. I was just wondering... that is..."

"Well? Spit it out."

"I was just wondering if you'd had a chance to approve my suggested changes. To the curriculum, that is."

She stared at him blankly, then sucked in a deep breath. "Those changes are still under consideration. You'll have my answer in the morning."

"Yes, Headmaster Snape. Thank you."

Satisfied with her performance, Lily stalked away. She made her way up one flight of stairs and then another, until finally, she reached the base of the tower leading up to the headmaster's office. Breathing out a sigh of relief, she began to ascend.

"Severus?"

*Oh, bloody hell. What now?!*

When she spun around, she was greeted by a pair of familiar gray eyes, glaring daggers at her from beneath a tartan nightcap.

“Yes, Minerva? What do you need? I was just about to retire.”

“I wanted to speak with you.”

“This is hardly an opportune moment, wouldn’t you agree? Whatever it is, I’m sure it can wait until morning.”

Unlike Carrow, Minerva wasn’t intimidated by Lily’s icy tone. She rose to the challenge, advancing a couple steps until they were standing face to face. “I would’ve been happy to do this weeks ago, Severus. But you’ve hardly been in residence all summer, nor have you bothered to respond to my requests for a meeting.”

“I’ve been busy,” Lily said stiffly, flicking a lock of limp black hair out of her eyes.

“Busy?” Minerva echoed, giving her a scathing look. “Out killing Muggles, were you? Or shut away with your master somewhere, laughing at all the innocent people who were foolish enough to put their trust in you? Tell me... did you feel *anything* when you killed him? When you saw him there on his knees, defenseless, begging for his life... was there even the slightest twinge of conscience as you lifted your wand? Or did you just...?”

“*Enough!*” Lily roared, startling herself with the intensity of her voice. ‘Enough,’ she repeated more quietly. “You will not speak to me that way. And you *will* address me by my proper title.”

“Very well, Severus. Which one would you prefer? Murderer? Traitor? Cowardly son of a...”

From out of nowhere, countless images flickered through Lily’s mind. Severus, struggling to defend Harry and his friends against a man he believed to be a cold-blooded murderer. Doing his best to save Sirius’s life, despite all the enmity that lay between them. Working tirelessly over Dumbledore’s cursed hand, desperate to save the man who’d been abusing his loyalty for years. Severus... miserable and alone, haunted by a past he could never escape... forced into silence, forced to do despicable things, yet never shying away from them. Not even when Dumbledore had ordered him to do the most unthinkable thing of all, condemning him to a world full of isolation and undeserved hatred.

And for Minerva to stand here and call him a traitor? A coward?!

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, you foolish woman,” she spat from between clenched teeth. It was only when she remembered the precariousness of Severus’s situation that she managed to bring her temper under control. “Though your personal opinions are hardly relevant in any case. I am your headmaster now, and you *will* treat me with respect, or...”

Minerva drew herself up to her full height. “I’m not afraid of you, Severus. Draw your wand, and we’ll see who...”

“Gryffindors,” Lily said, rolling her eyes. “Always so dramatic. I’m not threatening your safety, Minerva, simply reminding you that as your *employer*, I reserve the right to terminate your employment at my discretion. Do not give me a reason to do so.”

“You can’t...”

Lily smirked. “Try me.”

Minerva opened her mouth, then closed it again, shaking her head in frustration. “Fine, I won’t say another word. But if you hurt those children, Severus... if you harm a single hair on their precious heads, I’ll make you regret it. Remember that.”

Unable to help herself, Lily cocked an eyebrow. “Does that only hold true for the Gryffindors, or can the Slytherins hope to enjoy your protection as well?”

“The *Slytherins* hardly need...”

“Yes, that’s what I thought you’d say. Goodnight, Minerva.”

---

Severus paced the clearing for almost an hour before deciding it was safe to return to the castle. As headmaster, he had the ability to Apparate anywhere on the grounds with the exception of his private quarters. Frustrating, though he supposed it made sense. Those rooms were protected by the most powerful wards in existence, designed to be impenetrable. If that meant even the headmaster had limited means of accessing them, then so be it.

A soft “pop” returned him to his office, where he looked up to find Dumbledore staring at him through painted eyes. The old wizard’s attention shifted from him to the tapestry, forehead wrinkling in a bemused frown.

“Severus? I could’ve sworn I just saw you...”

So Lily had made it. She was safe. Releasing a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, Severus shrugged. “You must’ve drifted off for a few minutes. I just popped back down to give some last-minute instructions to Filch.”

“What sort of instructions?”

Severus rolled his eyes. Nosy bastard. “The Weasley twins have developed a charming product that emits the screams of a banshee,” he said, coming up with the lie on the spot. “Virtually undetectable to the naked eye unless one knows how to look for the signs.”

Dumbledore leaned forward, clearly intrigued. “And how’s that?”

“A slight shimmer on the back of a student’s hand.”

“Brilliant!”

“Indeed,” Severus said dryly. “It’s so wonderful to see all that talent devoted to the creation of childish pranks. Far better than doing something useful with it, like developing protective measures for the war effort.”

“Oh, come, Severus. Those boys are loyal members of the Order. We cannot predict how much they’ll have to sacrifice before the end. Would you begrudge them a little fun in the meantime?”

“No,” he admitted reluctantly, feeling a twinge of guilt as he remembered George’s severed ear. “A pointless discussion at any rate, particularly since I’m too tired to care. I’m

going to bed.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, get some sleep. You look like you need it.”

Bowing his head in acknowledgment, Severus slipped behind the tapestry and entered his quarters. The rooms were quiet enough to assume that Lily had fallen asleep until he heard a trickle of water from the bathroom. Horrified, he jerked his head around to stare at the closed door.

“Lily? Are you...” He stopped abruptly, cringing as he heard the toilet flush. “Are you still Polyjuiced?”

“I’ll be out in a minute,” came a muffled reply in his own voice. “Sorry, but I *really* had to go. Feels a bit different for a man, doesn’t it?”

“I... ah, can’t say I have a frame of reference for that.”

“No, I suppose not.” Lily responded, her voice full of barely suppressed amusement. “You’re not embarrassed, are you? I mean, it’s not like I’ve never seen it before.”

“What?! When? I *never*...”

“Oh, that was years ago. Remember the spider? On your shoe, just as you were coming out of the headmaster’s office. You trapped it in a vial...”

“Shit.” Severus dropped onto the couch. “That was *you*?”

“Yep.”

“God, Lily, I was going to chop you up and use you for potions ingredients!”

“I figured as much. What kind of potion?”

“That’s hardly the point! I nearly killed you!”

“No, Severus, you didn’t,” she said, the tone of her voice making it clear that the Polyjuice was wearing off. “Granted, I hadn’t realized that I’d just switch to another animal if the spider was killed, so it was a bit frightening. But...”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“For what? You couldn’t have known.”

“No, I suppose not.” He leaned back, resting his head against the couch as he tried to recall that night in more detail. Setting the vial on the table, yes... stripping off his clothes, then getting into the shower, and... wanking. Lots of wanking. Right there in front of her. ‘Fuck,’ he groaned, burying his head in his hands. “I didn’t...”

“What’s wrong?”

He glanced up at the bathroom door, thankful it was still closed. “Nothing.” If she wasn’t going to mention it, he sure as hell wasn’t either. “How are you feeling?”

In response, she let out a strange noise, somewhere between a squeak and a groan.

“Lily?”

"I... it's fine. Just the Polyjuice. It's going away, I... oh..." She sounded like herself now, though her voice was tremulous, as if her strength was fading along with the effects of the potion.

"What's going on? Do you need my help?"

"No, I can..." Trailing off, she let out a heavy sigh. "Yes, please. Would you mind?"

When he opened the door, she was seated on the floor with her head resting against the wall. The last remnants of the potion were gone, her smaller frame nearly swallowed by the black robes pooling out around her. Kneeling down, he tilted her face up to the light, concerned by the dark smudges beneath her eyes, standing out in sharp relief against the ghostly pallor of her skin.

"Don't worry," she said, flashing him a weak smile. "I'm all right. Just a bit tired. I think the Polyjuice helped, though it could've been the Strength Potion. I really don't know..."

"You weren't ready for that much exertion, with or without the potions. I'm sorry it was necessary, but at least you'll be more comfortable now. Come on... let's get you to bed."

She nodded, leaning forward as he slipped an arm around her to help her to her feet.

"Would you like me to carry you?"

"No, I can walk. Just don't let me fall, okay?"

"Never."

She took a couple steps then stumbled, clinging to his arm as she scowled down at her feet. "These robes aren't helping."

"Shall we take them off?" he asked, trying to ignore the suggestiveness of the question.

"Yes, please."

Letting her hold on to him for support, Severus unfastened the robes, sliding them off her shoulders and letting them fall to the floor before turning his attention to the frock coat. Soon enough, she was clad in nothing but his white button-down shirt, a delectable sight that sent a jolt of arousal through his body.

"Come," he said, grateful for the concealment provided by his own voluminous clothing. He was her caretaker, not her lover, which he did his best to remember as he helped her slip between the sheets. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done as she gazed up at him through drowsy eyes, bright red hair spilling in a glorious mass across the pillow.

"Comfortable?" he said, alarmed by the husky tone in his voice. It seemed so obvious, though she hardly seemed to notice as she stifled a huge yawn.

"Yes. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he responded, forcing himself to turn away. "Well... get some sleep then."

"What about you?"

"Me? Oh, I... have some paperwork I need to finish up. I'll just be in the study."



“Severus,” she murmured, and he heard her shift behind him. “You’re exhausted. Can’t that wait until morning?”

“I suppose so,” he said, letting out a weary sigh. “All right... I’ll be on the couch if you need me.”

“Severus.”

“Yes?” He turned around to find himself staring into a pair of exasperated green eyes.

“We’ve been sharing a bed for years now. What’s changed?”

*Everything*, he wanted to tell her, though he couldn’t think of a tactful way to express his thoughts. How could he point out that there was a world of difference between curling up with a cat and lying down next to the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen? No matter how he phrased it, she’d realize he was attracted to her, upsetting the delicate balance between them. And in her current condition, weak and vulnerable as she was? Such a revelation could easily leave her feeling threatened, which was the last thing he wanted.

“You’re still recovering, Lily. What you need is rest, preferably without any disturbance. I might toss and turn, or have a nightmare, or...”

“You’re as tired as I am, or close to it,” she pointed out, giving him a stubborn look. “You need to sleep in a proper bed, not on some cramped up couch.”

“I can always transfigure...”

“Oh, come on. This bed is huge. Besides, you’ve always been a quiet sleeper. You won’t disturb me, I promise.”

He could’ve countered her arguments, but the pleading in her eyes was impossible to resist. With a heavy sigh, he removed his robes, extinguishing most of the lights before taking off his frock coat. Seating himself on the other side of the bed, he pulled off his boots and socks before sliding beneath the covers.

Lily was correct — the bed was quite large, leaving plenty of space between them. She was also right in pointing out how exhausted he was, though of course, that had been his reasoning for suggesting the couch. It would’ve been easier to focus on *sleep* without her lying next to him, that damnable shirt slipping down to expose a bare shoulder as she turned on her side.

“Goodnight, Severus,” she whispered, snuggling deeper into the blankets as her eyes drifted closed.

“Goodnight, Lily.”

Unable to help himself, Severus watched Lily as she fell asleep, stunned all over again by the miracle of her return. It wasn’t a constant feeling, but one that struck him at random intervals, like bells sounding out to mark the hour. He’d almost forget, focused on potions or sleeping arrangements or some other practical matter. And then suddenly, he’d feel that telltale prickling behind his eyes again, his heart pounding in his chest as he was blindsided by another onslaught of emotion.

As with all things, he hid it well. Lily needed him to be strong, to maintain his composure in the dark days to come. Of course, he had every intention of doing so. Anything for her. But that didn't mean he wanted to think about it just yet. Fuck the war. Fuck the Dark Lord and Potter, the Death Eaters and the Order and everyone in between. Fuck his new role as headmaster, and fuck his inevitable demise. The only reality that mattered to him in this moment was Lily.

Lily... a shining beacon in a world of darkness. His heart, his soul, his own personal miracle, and in the end, his greatest triumph. All the failures that lay behind him seemed like nothing compared to this one simple truth. He'd brought Lily back. He'd saved her. One last chance, which he didn't intend to squander. No, he couldn't hope to survive this war, but he'd make damn sure she did. And that would be his final gift to them both. For her, a future where fear was no more than a distant memory... and for him? The comfort of knowing his life hadn't been lived in vain.

With that thought, Severus turned to face the wall, closing his eyes as he tried to relax. It almost worked... he was nearly asleep when he heard a rustling noise behind him, followed by a soft, breathy moan.

Fuck.

He glanced over his shoulder, his body immediately reacting to the sight of her. She was stretched out on her back, long, shapely legs illuminated by a sliver of moonlight. She'd pushed the covers off, one hand resting on her bare thigh, while the other was hidden in the folds of the shirt that had slipped down even further, exposing a tantalizing swell of breast with just a hint of... oh god, if she moved even *slightly*...

Forcing himself to look away, Severus brought his eyes up to her face. That was another mistake, one that proved to be his downfall as he took in her tangled hair, her flushed cheeks, her lips parting ever so slightly in a barely audible sigh.

Cursing under his breath, he sprang from the bed, headed straight for the bathroom.

"Fuck, Lily," he muttered, locking the door before casting a quick Muffliato. "You'll be the death of me."

Unfastening his trousers, he tried not to think about what he was doing. He just wanted to finish himself off as quickly as possible so he could get some sleep. But that all changed when the fantasy took over, a vivid image of her lying beside him followed by all the things he would've done if she'd been his to claim.

How would he have woken her? As gently as possible, leaning close to whisper in her ear as he stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. She would've moaned in response, the same sweet sound that still echoed in his ears, only in this case, he'd recognize it as an invitation to proceed. That, he would gladly do, pushing her hair aside to nuzzle her neck as he slid a hand inside her shirt to caress her breasts, his thumb brushing across her nipples while she shivered beneath his touch.

Severus began to pant, one hand braced against the wall as he stroked himself with the other, gradually picking up momentum.

Maybe he'd stop for a minute, just to see how she'd react. Would her eyes fly open, bewildered by the absence of pleasure? Would she beg him to resume his attentions? "Please, Severus," he could almost hear her whisper, and he shuddered at the thought, gripping himself more tightly.

She'd be fully awake by then, watching him with those beautiful green eyes as he proceeded to unfasten the buttons of her shirt. One after the other, prolonging the task for as long as he could stand it until finally, he'd come to the final button. And then he'd force himself to pause again, leaning over to capture her mouth in a deep, passionate kiss before pulling back to whisper in her ear.

"Say it, Lily," he'd murmur, tracing the contours with the tip of his tongue. "Tell me what you want."

"You."

Realizing he was teetering on the brink, Severus tried to slow down, not ready to let go of the fantasy. But he was too far gone now, harsh pants mingled with ragged grunts as he stroked himself faster, harder, a dozen images flickering through his mind in quick succession. Lily gazing up at him as he pushed the folds of her shirt aside... his lips moving down the length of her body... over her breasts, across her stomach and up her thighs, finally settling between them. Tasting her, touching her, hearing her whimper his name as he pleased her with his mouth...

"Fuck," he groaned, his train of thought shattered as a powerful climax ripped through his body. "Lily..."

When he came back to his senses, he was slumped against the wall, still breathing heavily as he reached up to wipe the sweat from his forehead. He hadn't come like that since... well, he couldn't even remember. Perhaps he should've felt ashamed of himself, but all he knew was an overwhelming sense of relief, especially when he thought about the deeper implications. Living in close proximity to Lily, beautifully human and so maddeningly desirable, wouldn't be easy. But if he could slip away sometimes, do what was necessary to ease the tension, perhaps he'd be able to manage well enough.

Deeply exhausted, he exited the bathroom, shooting the couch a dismissive glance before heading back to bed. Stretching out on his back, he pulled the covers over them both before turning to look at her again. But the sight of her provoked a different emotion this time, a raw, empty feeling he could never hope to satisfy with a quick trip to the bathroom.

More than anything, he just wanted to hold her, to feel the warmth of her body in his arms as he drifted off to sleep. He wanted it so much, in fact, that he started to reach for her, almost deluding himself into believing she wouldn't mind. That maybe, just maybe, she'd welcome his embrace.

And then he turned to face the wall again, cursing himself for his stupidity. This was Lily, who'd only ever thought of him as a friend. Lily, who'd married another man, happy in her choice until his own actions had torn her world apart. Lily, who treated him with kindness, a fond sort of affection, despite having every reason to hate him. What right did he have to wish for anything more?

None whatsoever, though he supposed that was a moot point. Some things just couldn't be helped.

## 37. Awakening

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### Chapter 37: Awakening

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Lily,

*I thought it best not to wake you.*

*I've left some things in the study — food, clothing, potions (should you need them). Make yourself comfortable and be sure to get plenty of rest.*

*I'll check on you this afternoon if I can slip away. If not, I'll see you this evening.*

S

*PS — Do not leave these rooms under any circumstances.*

Setting the letter aside, Lily glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It was just after 9 AM, meaning she had the entire day to herself. But what to do with all that free time?

As a cat, she'd spent her days eating, napping, grooming, and roaming around the castle. As a human? Well, wandering the halls was out of the question, and she didn't feel like going back to sleep. But food sounded good, and so she slipped out of bed, padding to the study where she found several platters waiting on the table. She helped herself to eggs, sausages, and toast, happy that the food was still warm. Severus had even left her a pot of tea, which was nice and hot thanks to a well-placed Stasis Charm.

Eating with utensils was awkward at first, but she soon got the hang of it, making short work of her meal as she pondered the other items on the table. Clothing, a hairbrush, a few odds and ends meant for personal care. She recognized them all, yet the thought of using them on herself was disconcerting, to say the least. Should she wear the blue robes or the green ones? What was she supposed to do with her hair? Trivial matters, perhaps, but bewildering all the same.

In the past, she would've chosen the green robes, left her hair loose or maybe scooped it into a ponytail. But she wasn't that girl anymore, was she? No, she was a grown woman, one who hadn't even seen her own reflection in nearly two decades. She knew she had arms, legs, a body, all of which were distinctly human. Her hands looked normal enough, as did her feet, and she could feel the weight of her hair against her back.

Beyond that? Nothing.

Of course, there were mirrors in the bathroom, but she'd still been Polyjuiced when she'd encountered them the night before. She'd gazed at Severus's face for quite some time, shaping her lips into one of his rare smiles and finding comfort there. But the idea of looking at her own reflection? That was... terrifying. What if she didn't recognize herself? What if the resurrection had distorted her appearance, leaving her with the face of a stranger?

Silly, perhaps, but these fears had nothing to do with pride or vanity. She just needed proof of who she was, something familiar to cling to in this strange reality where any concept of “self” had yet to be defined. What waited in that mirror could either anchor her, giving her a tangible reminder of what it meant to be *Lily*... or it would set her even further adrift.

Still, there was no sense in putting it off any longer. Taking a deep breath, she gathered the items Severus had left for her and headed for the bathroom, closing the door behind her before turning to face the full-length mirror on the opposite wall.

“Oh...”

The woman staring back at her was hopelessly disheveled, hair spilling in a wild array of tangles down her back. But that hair was *red*, the exact shade she remembered... lighter than auburn, darker than copper. Her face... slightly older, but still *hers*, right down to the tiny, barely perceptible scar at the edge of her hairline. The eyes were the same, vividly green, surrounded by a thick fringe of dark lashes. That nose her mother had lovingly described as “pert”... those lips she’d thought of as a trifle too plump. The same high cheekbones Petunia had always envied, slightly flushed and damp with tears...

Her eyes drifted lower, taking in the overly large shirt that had slipped off one shoulder, leaving her breast exposed. When had that happened? She hadn’t even noticed, though that was hardly surprising after spending so many years as an animal. Definitely something she’d have to be more careful about in the future. Not that Severus would be offended, but...

“Oh god.” Letting out a groan, she buried her face in her hands, wondering how she could’ve been so oblivious. His flimsy excuses. Shooting them all down until he’d finally given up and laid down beside her. Falling asleep, only to be startled awake when he’d sprung from the bed and hurried to the bathroom. Wondering what was taking him so long, whether she should call out and ask if he was okay. Fighting to keep her eyes open as she’d waited for his return...

In retrospect, it was painfully obvious, yet it hadn’t even crossed her mind at the time. She’d just wanted him beside her, had seen no reason why he should sleep elsewhere when they’d been sharing a bed for years. It had never occurred to her that from his perspective, there was a huge difference between sleeping with a cat and a woman he clearly found attractive. Especially when that woman had been half naked to boot.

Poor Severus. Should she apologize? No, that would only embarrass him. Besides, she needed time to get used to the idea. Not that it was a surprise... he’d made his feelings abundantly clear, even if he’d never put them into words. But realizing it was now possible for him to *act* on those feelings? That was something new, both frightening and intriguing. To think that he could’ve pulled her into his arms last night, unfastened his trousers and made love to her right then and there...

Lily shivered, unbuttoning her shirt and letting it fall to the floor. Mesmerized by the sight of her body, she ran her hands over her breasts, across her stomach and gently curving hips. She looked exactly the same, from her long legs to the light dusting of freckles on her shoulders. Even her birthmark was still there, a dark smudge on her otherwise unblemished thigh. She’d always hated that thing, disguising it with makeup or concealment charms. Even James had never seen it.

It seemed so silly now, all that fuss over her appearance. Hiding her birthmark. Worrying that her breasts were too small, then too large after she'd had a child. Fretting over her stretch marks, now faint, silvery lines she could hardly see without squinting. Going on diets when her Muggle jeans felt a little tight, brewing potions to help her shed her post baby weight. Granted, she'd never thought of herself as *ugly*, but still... had she ever truly loved herself just the way she was?

No. She hadn't known how precious her body was, imperfections and all. She'd had to live without it to understand its importance, to decide that she'd never hide those flaws again. Not from herself... and not from Severus either if it came to that. She'd give him *all* of herself, fully understanding what a gift it was to be able to do so.

An intriguing concept, though one that would have to wait. She was only beginning to learn how to function as a human again, hardly knew how to take care of herself let alone anyone else. As eager as she was to make her feelings known, she simply wasn't ready, no matter how much she would've loved to pretend otherwise. She needed to get a handle on the basics first. The rest would come in time.

With that thought in mind, she stepped over to the tub and turned on the faucet, inhaling deeply as the scent of lavender filled the room. The tub was similar to the one she remembered from the Prefects' bathroom, though smaller, a perfect oval carved from pristine white marble and sunk into the floor. Like its counterpart, it filled up in a matter of seconds, translucent bubbles dancing across the surface as she lowered herself into the water with a blissful sigh.

She'd forgotten how much she'd loved baths... warmth, comfort, all of her tension melting away as she leaned her head against the edge of the tub and lost herself in thought. The familiar ritual brought back so many memories... herself as a little girl, splashing around in the foamy water while insisting she was a mermaid. Fights with Petunia, who'd always accused her of hogging the bathroom. Then coming to Hogwarts, and...

Petunia? Lily frowned, nearly dropping the bottle of shampoo she was holding. *Harry*.

"My god," she whispered, as the last traces of shock abruptly disappeared. She was human. This was *real*. And the enormity of what that meant, everything that might be possible now? This wasn't just a matter of learning to use a fork again, remembering how to wash behind her ears or wondering what clothes to wear. It was a brand new *life*, a chance to do all the things she'd only dreamed of for years beyond counting. Revelations to be made... conversations to be had...

Naturally, some of those would have to wait. But she could talk to Severus, truly *talk* to him, tell him things she'd been forced to keep to herself for far too long. And Harry... surely he could know the truth now, even if she still had to conceal it from the rest of the world. How would he react? Would he be angry with her for not revealing herself before now? Could she make him understand why she hadn't?

Lily climbed out of the tub, her mind spinning off in a hundred directions as she grabbed a towel and wrapped it around herself. A drying charm would've been far more convenient, leading her to another conclusion. She needed a wand. With Death Eaters lurking about the castle, the threat of war hanging over their heads...

Or had the war already begun? She had no idea what was happening on the outside, only that Voldemort had attempted to capture Harry over the summer and that Severus had thwarted those plans, enduring a terrible punishment in the process. Harry had gone into hiding, at Grimmauld Place, or so she assumed. But where was he now? Today was the start of term... was he on his way back to Hogwarts?

No, of course not. Death Eaters masquerading as teachers, Voldemort's most trusted servant acting as headmaster? Severus would've done everything in his power to keep him from harm, of course, but Harry couldn't know that. From his perspective, showing up here would've been tantamount to suicide. And then there was that business about the Horcruxes...

Distracted by her thoughts, Lily slipped on a loose cotton nightgown, then headed back into the study. Unfortunately, there were no current issues of the *Daily Prophet* lying around, nothing to help her figure out what was going on. She gathered a handful of books instead, rudimentary volumes on Charms and Transfiguration to help her pass the time until Severus's return.

Carrying the books into the bedroom, she glanced at the clock again, then let out a heavy sigh. 12:47?  
It was going to be a long day.

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"Headmaster? The train has just pulled into the station."

"Very well, Alecto. I'll be down shortly."

Severus waited for the door to close behind the hideous woman, then leaned forward, pinching the bridge of his nose. Would this day ever end? He'd been up to his ears in paperwork since 6 AM, between impromptu meetings and last-minute instructions for the staff at large. How many times had he glanced over at the tapestry, maddened to have Lily so close, yet beyond his reach? A couple times, he'd risen from his chair and headed in that direction, only to be thwarted by another knock, another owl swooping through the window with a message that demanded his immediate attention.

Now he had no chance to slip away. In a matter of minutes, the students would be filing into the Great Hall, ready for the Sorting ceremony and ensuing feast. A tiresome, prolonged affair under any circumstances, made infinitely worse by his new position. Rather than sitting off to one side, applauding when appropriate or making small talk with the other professors, he'd be front and center, expected to preside over the whole damn thing.

Well, nothing to do but get it over with.

"Severus?"

He blinked, glancing over at the portrait which had remained uncharacteristically silent all day. "Yes?"

"You've done well so far, but you must be careful. They will be testing you tonight, looking for any signs of weakness. You must..."



"I *know* what I have to do," he snapped, tired of suppressing his irritation. "Far better than you do, I imagine."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "I conducted the opening ceremonies for many years, Severus."

"Indeed." Rising from his seat, Severus took a step closer to the portrait. "All right, then. Why don't you tell me what it was like to stand behind that podium, knowing that every person in the room would prefer to see you dead?"

"Not everyone, surely. Your Slytherins..."

"Are under the influence of their parents, all of whom would be happy to usurp my position in the Dark Lord's favor. They might be inclined to tolerate me more than the others, but only as a matter of practicality. They'd strike me down in an instant if they thought they could get away with it, if they saw any advantage in doing so."

"That's a rather bleak perception, even for you. I find it hard to believe that *every* student feels that way."

"Perhaps not." Severus conceded, shrugging on his outer robes. "But if I survive this night, it will have nothing to do with optimism, misplaced or not. Now if you'll excuse me..."

Dumbledore called after him as he slipped out the door, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Granted, he wasn't foolish enough to pretend he wasn't still dependent on the former headmaster in certain respects. But what he had to face tonight... suspicion, fear, outright hatred... the knowledge that the slightest misstep could spell his doom? That was all on him, for reasons a man like Dumbledore could never understand.

Sucking in a deep breath, he swept into the hall, features fixed in a stoic mask. He was greeted by absolute silence. No chatter, no rustling clothing or even an errant snuffle to break the stillness. The children stood like statues, staring at him with wide eyes as he took his position at the high table. Like the students, the professors were frozen in place, waiting for him to proceed.

"Professor McGonagall?" he said, catching several flinches out of the corner of his eye even though he'd spoken softly. "The Sorting ceremony, if you please."

"Of course... Headmaster."

He barely heard the song that followed, couldn't have repeated a single line even five minutes later. Something about preconceived notions, stripping away all masks to get to the truth of the matter. Rising above all expectations and achieving one's potential? Whatever. He just wanted the damn ceremony to be over with, a desire that wasn't helped by the fact that most of the children hesitated before approaching the stool. One girl in particular, a tiny thing with braided pigtails, refused to step forward at all until Minerva took her by the hand.

"Hufflepuff!" the hat shouted, startling the girl so badly that she knocked over the stool. She glanced over her shoulder at him, her eyes full of terror, as if she expected him to hurl a curse at her for the supposed offense.

"Go to your table, Miss Whitmore," he said quietly. "Your housemates are waiting for you."

“Zabinsky, Zara,” Minerva called, and then at last, it was over. Severus rose to his feet, his eyes sweeping across the room before he cleared his throat and began to speak.

“Welcome to Hogwarts. Those of you who are joining us for the first time this year do so with a distinct advantage. Discipline. Respect. Academic excellence. You will learn the importance of these values from day one.” He paused, glowering at several of the older students before he continued. “As for our *returning* pupils, be advised that behaviors that were tolerated in the past are no longer acceptable at this school. My predecessor might’ve looked the other way, but trust that I will not do the same. Break the rules, and you *will* pay the consequences. Do I make myself clear?”

The question was met by silence.

“I *said*, ‘Do I make myself clear?’”

“Yes, Headmaster,” a voice piped up from the back of the room, gradually joined by a handful of others.

“Very well. Prefects? You will find copies of our code of conduct in your Common Rooms, along with a list of reminders from Mr. Filch. Be sure to review these documents with your housemates before you retire.”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

With a sigh of relief, Severus returned to his seat, withdrawing his wand as he did so. He tapped it on the table, once, twice, and the platters filled with food, bringing an end to the most trying part of his evening.

“Eat,” he commanded, though he couldn’t bring himself to touch the meal.

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Returning to his quarters was like stepping into another world. Dimly lit and peaceful, the rooms smelled faintly of lavender, a fragrance that eased some of the tension in his muscles as he shrugged off his outer robes.

“Lily?” he called, keeping his voice low in case she was asleep.

“In the bedroom.”

She was reclining on the bed, hair spilling across the pillow like a living flame beneath the candlelight. An open book lay in her hands, her lips curving into a brilliant smile that knocked the breath right out of him.

“You look...” He trailed off, at a loss for words.

“Better, I hope.”

“Much. How are you feeling?”

“Good.” She sat up, setting her book aside. “I was a little tired this afternoon, but nothing a nap couldn’t fix. Didn’t even need the potions.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And the other things I left for you... you were able to manage well enough?”

Stupid question with her sitting right in front of him, dressed in a clean nightgown, her hair freshly brushed. He could pretend nonchalance in the face of the most powerful Dark wizard in existence, say all the right things whenever he needed to do so. Yet being around Lily had a way of making him feel like a clumsy schoolboy, leaving him fumbling over even the most basic attempts at conversation. Would that become easier in time? He hoped so.

“Yes, thank you. It was easier than I’d expected, really. I ended up taking two baths... had forgotten how much I liked them.”

“Well.” He cleared his throat, pushing away an image of her lying naked in a tub of soapy water. “Feel free to take as many as you please.”

“What about you?” she said after a moment.

Puzzled, he frowned. “What about me?”

“How are *you* feeling?”

Severus couldn’t remember the last time anyone had asked him that. What could he tell her? That he was sore, exhausted, famished, dreading the days to come yet looking forward to them all the same simply because she was here? Or maybe that he was more terrified than he’d ever been, thrilled by her presence... paralyzed by the thought of losing her all over again?

“I...” He took a deep breath, then sighed. “I’ve had better days.”

She moved a little closer, giving him a sympathetic look. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly. At any rate, it was nothing I didn’t expect. I’d rather just forget about it for a while.”

“All right,” she said. “Well, have you eaten?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you order up some sandwiches? You can do that, right?”

“Of course, but...”

“I’m a bit hungry myself, actually. A sandwich sounds good.”

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Lily smiled to herself as Severus left to get the food. She’d always had her own special way of manipulating him, tactics she’d learned when they’d still been children. Whenever he’d neglected to do something for his own sake, she’d pretend that the need was hers. She might’ve been warm, but if she’d noticed him shivering, she’d insist she wanted to go sit in the sun. When he’d grumbled over a tedious assignment, she’d ask for assistance with hers, helping him complete his own in the process.

And now, he wouldn’t have bothered to retrieve the food for himself, but for *her*...

In truth, she wasn’t hungry at all. But he didn’t need to know that. She’d nibble on a sandwich then announce that she was full, leaving him with no reason not to eat the rest.

Rising from the bed, she headed for the sitting room, struck by another idea. If she offered him the bed, he'd never accept it, insisting that she was still recovering and needed to sleep in comfort. But if she fell asleep on the *couch* (or pretended to, at least), he'd have no other choice. And why not? She could crawl back into bed as soon as he left in the morning, sleep all day if she wished to do so. But he had precious few hours to rest, and she intended to help him make the most of them.

"I hope you like roast beef," Severus said as he entered the room, carrying a platter. "I couldn't remember."

"I do."

"Good. Well, help yourself. I'll be right back with the tea."

They ate without speaking, which was somehow awkward and comfortable at the same time. She wanted to say something, give voice to the dozens of questions she'd never been able to ask him before. But where to start? How could she begin to make up for more than twenty years of silence?

In the end, she just blurted out the first question that came to mind, not realizing what she was about to say until it was too late.

"Severus?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why do you hate Harry?"

## 38. The Gift of Absolution

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### Chapter 38: The Gift of Absolution

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Severus froze, his teacup suspended in midair. “What?”

He’d heard what she’d said, of course... five little words that kept echoing through his mind, increasing in volume as if trying to match his rising panic.

*Why do you hate Harry?*

Meanwhile, Lily looked horrified, pressing a hand to her mouth as she stared back at him through wide green eyes. Her eyes. *His* eyes. That boy who was the image of his father in every possible way, except for those damnable eyes.

“I don’t...” he started, struggling to formulate a response.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know why I said that. You don’t have to tell me... I mean, I guess we *should* talk about it sooner or later, but I shouldn’t have... I didn’t...”

“Lily? You’re babbling.” Somehow *her* anxiety made him feel a little calmer.

“Sorry,” she muttered, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “It’s just... I didn’t mean to just blurt it out like that.”

“Nonetheless, it’s a valid question. One that deserves an answer, even if I don’t quite know how to give you one.”

“You *really* don’t have to...”

Severus leaned forward, setting his teacup on the table. Of course, there were no shortage of reasons as to why Potter had been the bane of his existence for the past six years. Far longer, really, when considering that he’d disliked the boy long before he’d ever set eyes on him. But what could he say? How could he possibly explain himself without alienating her in the process?

“I don’t... *hate* him.”

“You don’t?”

“No,” he said more firmly, surprised that there was a fair amount of truth to his words. “Granted, I don’t like him. I won’t lie about that. I’ve *never* liked him. But hatred? I wouldn’t go that far. I tend to reserve that particular emotion for those I’d rather see dead. Whatever issues I might have with Pott... your son, I wish him no harm.”

Lily nodded, her expression unreadable. “I know you don’t. After everything you’ve done to protect him...”

“That wasn’t for his sake,” Severus said before he could stop himself. “What I mean is, that was part of the bargain. Switching sides, staying out of Azkaban. It was my duty, for lack of a better word.”

“It was more than that.”

“Well, yes. I’d love nothing more than to see the Dark Lord fall. If the boy has the power to make that happen, the least I can do is...”

“Why him?” she suddenly burst out. “I’ve seen a lot over the years, but the one thing I *still* don’t understand is why it has to be Harry. Just because he’s a target? Because of that stupid prophecy? Why not send him into hiding? Why didn’t Dumbledore do that *years* ago? Why aren’t the Order out hunting for these Horcruxes, rather than leaving it in the hands of a teenager? He’s barely more than a child!”

“Lily...”

“Well, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” she continued as if she hadn’t heard him, her eyes blazing with fury. “Leaving Harry with my bitch of a sister. Letting him face that Quirrell when he was only 11 years old. 11! And then the next year, endangering him and all the other children when they should’ve been sent home! Dumbledore let Harry go down to that chamber, he *let* him...”

“He had his reasons,” Severus interrupted, at a loss.

“Oh yes, I’m sure he did. You know what I think? I think he enjoyed it. Moving Harry around like a pawn, treating him like his personal attack dog. Goaded and *manipulating* him into...”

“Teaching him how to protect himself.”

Lily raised an eyebrow. “By putting him in mortal danger?”

“I know it seems...”

“It *seems* like hiring competent Defense professors would’ve been a far more sensible approach. Letting him learn how to protect himself in a *safe* environment. Not sticking him with buffoons like that Lockhart, then turning a blind eye when he went running off after basilisks and suspected murderers. How can you excuse that?”

“I don’t. Believe me, I’ve questioned Dumbledore’s actions many times. He was rather... less cautious than I would’ve been. Nonetheless, I’m sure he did the best he could. What he felt like he *had* to do.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Lily paused, letting out a shuddering sigh. “Anyway, there’s no changing it now, is there? I just hope that Harry, wherever he is... I hope he’s okay. Have you heard anything?”

“No,” Severus said quietly. “I haven’t.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, isn’t it? I mean, if something had happened to him...”

“I’d know about it.”

“And you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?” She leaned forward and clutched his hand, sending a shiver up his spine at the unexpected contact. “Promise you’ll tell me if it comes to that.”

Severus knew what he needed to do. Tell her the truth, that her son was destined to die. If nothing else, it would clear up her confusion, help her understand why the boy had been thrust into the thick of things right from the start. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Not with those beautiful eyes gazing into his, unguarded and filled with trust.

Giving her hand a gentle squeeze, he said, “If I hear anything, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thank you.”

They sat in silence for a while, Severus idly sipping his tea while Lily leaned her head against the couch, her eyes half closed. He should’ve asked if she was tired, perhaps suggested that she go on to bed. Indeed, he was rather exhausted himself. But he hated the thought of being separated from her, even if she was only in the other room. He was growing used to her presence now, but he still had moments where he was struck all over again by the notion that she was too good to be true, that he’d wake up to discover that it had all been a dream.

Besides, they still had so much to talk about. Not the boy, perhaps — he was glad he’d managed to extricate himself from that particular line of questioning. But everything else? All those things he’d promised himself he’d ask her if ever given the chance?

Now here she was... Lily in the flesh, and he could only think of a single question.

“Lily?”

“Hmmm?”

“What happened? That night in Godric’s Hollow...”

All traces of drowsiness disappeared as she sat straight up, an expression flickering across her face that could only be described as haunted.

“Forgive me,” he said hastily. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s all right,” she responded, giving him a wan smile. “I’m just not sure what to say about it. It was... painful. Terrifying. But more than anything? *Confusing*. I still don’t understand why he did what he did. Why would he cast a spell that might’ve saved me? All these years, and it still doesn’t make sense.”

Severus sucked in a sharp breath. “I asked him to spare you.”

“You did?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Only me?”

“Lily, I couldn’t have saved the boy no matter what I’d said. Surely you must realize that.”

“I know.” She hesitated, then said, “Did you really think that would work? That I’d just... stand aside while he killed my baby?”

“No, but I had to try. There was always a chance he might’ve Stunned you, or... I don’t know.” He shifted uncomfortably, not daring to meet her eyes. “It was the only option I had.”

“I would’ve hated you for it, you know. If I’d lost Harry, I wouldn’t have wanted to live.”

Her words sent a cold chill up his spine, though his reaction had nothing to do with the past. No, he could only think about the future, what it would do to her when she learned that her son would have to die at Voldemort’s hand. The fact that she’d despise him for keeping the truth from her was bad enough. But knowing that she might get herself killed in a futile attempt to save the boy? That was infinitely worse.

“That night,” she began, her face taking on a faraway expression. “He yelled at me to run — James, that is. Told me to take the baby and run. I don’t know where he thought I was supposed to go. I guess he was speaking out of panic, because there were anti-apparition wards on the house. I took Harry to the bedroom, locked the door, tried to block it. As if that would make any difference. Before I knew it, there was a cloaked figure standing right in front of me, telling me to get out of the way. When I refused, he lifted his wand, and... I can’t even describe what happened next. It was the most painful thing I’ve ever experienced...”

Severus nodded, resisting the urge to speak as he waited for her to continue.

“The next thing I knew, I was outside. I had no idea what was going on, or why everything was so much bigger than it should’ve been. I didn’t know what to think, what to do. But then I saw someone coming, and...”

“Who?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

“You. I followed you into the house. Attached myself to your boot and let you carry me, really. You went up the stairs and that’s when I saw James. I already assumed he was dead, of course. But seeing him like that...” She trailed off, a single tear trickling down her cheek. “You went into the bedroom, and I... well, you know what happened next.”

Severus flinched, struck by a vivid memory of clutching her broken body to his chest. Sobbing his fucking eyes out, ranting and cursing and apologizing like a goddamned broken record, as if that could’ve reversed what had happened. Knowing that Lily had been there, *alive*, witnessing what was perhaps the most vulnerable moment of his life? His grief... his agony. The gut wrenching remorse of knowing that *he* had done this to her... that she was dead as a result of his actions, no matter how unintentional those actions had been.

“Severus,” she whispered. Only then did he realize that he was cringing away from her, his face averted in shame. “Severus, look at me. Please.”

He couldn’t resist her. Even now, when he would’ve rather endured the Cruciatus than look her in the eye, it never even crossed his mind to refuse. He looked up to find her gazing at him with eyes full of compassion, felt her touch his hand as she spoke again.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

He laughed, a harsh, humorless sound that echoed off the walls.

“Really, it wasn’t. You did your best to save me, you...”

*“I’m the one who gave the fucking prophecy to the Dark Lord!”* he hissed, feeling the blood drain from his face as the words left his mouth. He hadn’t meant to say it, would’ve



preferred to go to his grave without her ever knowing the truth. But he couldn't stand her sympathy, couldn't bear to have her exonerate him for a crime she wasn't even aware of.

"I know that. But you..."

"What?" He stared at her, dumbstruck. "You *knew*? How? All these years, I've never spoken of it. Not *once*."

Her fingers were curled around his now, tightening their grip as he tried to pull away. "It was the end of last year. The night that Dumbledore... I was following Harry through the halls when he ran into Trelawney. Isn't that her name?"

"Yes. Wretched woman."

"Sounds about right. Anyway, she seemed a bit drunk, started babbling about the night Dumbledore hired her, and..."

"So the boy knows, too? Bloody fantastic."

Lily nodded. "He was pretty upset. Went straight to Dumbledore's office to demand an explanation."

"Naturally," Severus said, suppressing a flash of irritation. "And what did Dumbledore say?"

"That you'd made a mistake," she said quietly. "A terrible mistake. That you had no idea who the prophecy referred to, that you were horrified when you realized we were the targets. Isn't that the truth?"

"Yes. But he swore he'd never speak of it, that the boy would *never*..."

"That was all he said, Severus. Harry tried to push the issue, but Dumbledore wouldn't budge. Told Harry that he trusted you completely and refused to answer any further questions."

Unable to help himself, Severus snorted. "I'm sure that went over well."

"Very."

"But if you knew about the prophecy, how... I mean, why...?"

"Why aren't I angry?" she said, staring down at their joined hands. "Why do I choose to trust you rather than hating you forever?"

"Yes. Fuck, Lily, I destroyed your *life*! Because of me, you were almost killed... hell, for all intents and purposes, you *were* killed. You lost *everything*, and I..."

"Did you point your wand at me and scream the Killing Curse?"

He shook his head. "No, of course not. I would *never*... but you wouldn't have been targeted in the first place if I hadn't..."

"Are you so sure of that?"

"If I hadn't been listening at the door, if I hadn't..."

“That prophecy put me in danger the moment it was spoken. It’s easy to think I would’ve been better off if you hadn’t overheard it that night, but it would’ve come out one way or another. These things always do. Trelawney could’ve blurted it out in the middle of Diagon Alley. Someone else with her powers might’ve repeated it somewhere. Or someone could’ve found it in the Department of Mysteries... weren’t Death Eaters working at the Ministry at the time?”

“Yes, but...”

She smiled, tilting her head to one side in a gesture as familiar as it was endearing. “You see? Who’s to say what might’ve happened? What you did had consequences, yes... but for all we know, the alternative could’ve been worse.”

“Worse?” He frowned. “How so?”

“You went straight to Dumbledore. You asked him to hide us, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. Now imagine if someone else had reported the prophecy to You-Know-Who. We wouldn’t have gone into hiding, would’ve been blindsided when he came for Harry. Hell, there’s a good chance I wouldn’t have even been home at the time, since I would’ve still been working for the Order. Knowing that my baby would’ve died without my protection... alone and scared, and...”

“Please, Lily,” Severus said softly, reaching up to brush a tear from her cheek. “Don’t cry. I understand what you’re saying. I do. But if the prophecy had never been revealed...”

“Then I still would’ve been stuck in the middle of a war with no end in sight. Targeted because of my blood status, prophecy or no. I would’ve kept fighting for the Order, and sooner or later, I probably would’ve died... like so many of my friends had already done. I might’ve been tortured, raped...”

“All right,” he said, holding up a hand to stop her. “I get the point.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“And you wonder why I don’t hate you?”

He stared back at her in silence, unsure of what to say.

“It was a *war*, Severus. You only did what anyone would’ve done in your situation. You couldn’t have known what the consequences would be. What matters is what you did in the aftermath. You were willing to risk your life to protect us, which you’ve been doing ever since. How *could* I hate you?”

“Lily, I...” There was a hot prickling behind his eyes that had nothing to do with exhaustion. “I’m still sorry. What you suffered, everything you lost... I’m so sorry.”

She shook her head, her lips curving into a wistful smile. “I’m not. I was given the chance to protect my child. To stop a war, saving hundreds of innocent lives. *You* gave me that, whether you realized it or not. And while I would’ve been happy to sacrifice myself, you

found another way to save me. He would've never cast that second spell if it wasn't for you. I wouldn't have gotten to see my son grow up, wouldn't have... god, Severus. To think you have *anything* to apologize for..."

Without understanding how it had happened, he was in her arms, his face pressed against the curve of her neck. And then he couldn't help himself, his body heaving with harsh, shuddering breaths as he clung to her like a lifeline, soaking her skin with his tears.

"I'm s-sorry..."

"Shhh," Lily murmured, holding him closer as she rubbed his back in soothing circles. "It's all right."

Perhaps he should've felt ashamed of himself. But he was beyond that now, desperate for comfort in a world that had taught him never to expect such things. Surrounded by people who were blind to his grief, his regrets, knew nothing of the bitter remorse that had haunted his every waking moment for the past sixteen years.

Only Dumbledore had known the truth, but had he ever *understood*? No... the surprise on his face when Severus had produced his Patronus stood as proof of that.

No one had ever seen him for who he truly was, had ever *cared*... except Lily.

Lily, who had more reason than anyone to turn her back on him. Lily, who'd seen his ugly mistakes and deepest regrets laid bare and *hadn't* recoiled in horror. Lily, who'd offered him her acceptance... her forgiveness... healing wounds that had festered for half a lifetime with that simple act of kindness.

Severus didn't know how long he stayed in her arms. Long enough to fall apart completely, weeping like a child as she murmured soft words of comfort. She was still holding him when he managed to pull himself together, utterly exhausted yet more relaxed than he'd felt in years. And he was still there when that relaxation gave way to tension of a different sort, a growing awareness of their close proximity... her warmth, her softness, the sweet fragrance of lavender in her hair...

The steady rise and fall of her chest.

He lifted his head, nearly laughing aloud as he caught sight of her face. She'd fallen asleep, legs draped across his lap, head resting against the back of the couch. An awkward position, to say the least, though she looked peaceful enough.

"Come on," he said softly. "Let's get you to bed."

Scooping her into his arms, he carried her to the bedroom, lowering her to rest among the pillows. She didn't stir at all... not until he brushed a lock of hair away from her forehead, then turned to walk away.

"Stay," she mumbled. "Please."

Unable to think of a single reason why he shouldn't, he shed everything but his trousers then slipped into bed beside her, careful to leave a respectful distance between them. But then he heard the rustle of sheets, followed by the weight of her head on his shoulder as she pressed herself against his side.

“Goodnight, Severus.”

It didn’t mean anything. He knew that. Completely platonic, just as it had always been. But somehow, at least for tonight, it was enough.

## 39. Familiarity

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### Chapter 39: Familiarity

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“I need a wand.”

Severus lifted his eyes from his paperwork. “Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, you’re still recovering. It’s only been...”

“It’s been almost two weeks now.” Lily glanced down at the book in her hands, tracing the gold lettering with one finger. “I’ve been brushing up on everything I can — Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, a bit of Defense. But reading can only do so much. I need to practice.”

Setting his quill down, Severus leaned back in his chair. “Yes, I suppose you do.”

“Anyway, look at me. I’m fine now.”

Glad to have a legitimate excuse, he gazed at her for a long moment, his eyes sweeping over her from head to toe. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders, thick and lustrous, shimmering like a copper coin beneath the candlelight. Her eyes were bright and clear, and her pale skin was luminous, cheeks tinted with a healthy glow.

As usual, she was dressed in a thin nightgown, her bare feet propped up on the couch. Her choice of attire had baffled him at first, until she’d reminded him that she’d gone without clothing for years. She’d get used to it eventually, but in the meantime, regular robes felt uncomfortable and constrictive. Why bother with them as long as she didn’t have to go out in public?

Why indeed? He certainly wasn’t going to complain.

He’d transfigured several additional nightgowns in a similar style — delicate wisps of fabric held up by thin shoulder straps, low necklines trimmed with a touch of lace. An impressive feat, and he couldn’t help feeling proud of his handiwork. Granted, his Transfiguration skills had always been adequate, but he’d never attempted anything as intricate as women’s clothing.

Nothing satisfied him more than seeing those nightgowns on Lily, however. They suited her perfectly, highlighting her smooth shoulders and the graceful curve of her neck... dipping down low enough to offer him a tantalizing glimpse of...

Realizing he was staring, Severus cleared his throat, forcing his eyes back up to her face. She looked... *amused*. Well, better than disgusted, he supposed.

“Indeed. You look very...” He trailed off, alarmed by the husky tone in his voice. And then desperate to change the subject, he continued in a rush, “All right then, we’ll have to get you a wand. I’m not sure how to go about it being as Ollivander is currently... missing, but there must be a way. Ollivander isn’t the only wand maker in the world, after all. Our only real obstacle is that you can’t leave the castle.”

“What about the Room of Requirement?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Capable of conjuring many things, yes. I’ve heard Dumbledore’s story about the chamberpots more times than I care to remember. But a wand? That would be a tall order.”

Lily leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. “Maybe not a conjured wand then, but what about the Room of Hidden Things? I mean, someone is bound to have stashed a wand in there at *some* point, right?”

“Perhaps, though that doesn’t guarantee it would work for you.”

“No, but it’s the best option we have. Certainly the safest.”

“True.” Severus nodded, rising to his feet. “Very well. I’ll be back soon.”

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Other than a few sleepy nods from the portraits, Severus didn’t encounter anyone as he made his way up to the seventh floor. He strode by the tapestry then turned to walk past again, all his attention focused on a single phrase.

*I need a wand for Lily. I need a wand for Lily. I need...*

On the third pass, the door materialized. He pushed it open, his eyes growing wide as he stepped into the room.

Naturally, he’d heard rumors about the Room of Hidden Things, though he’d never had a reason to go inside. Clutter was to be expected, as was the heavy layer of dust that blanketed the discarded objects. But he hadn’t imagined that the room would be so massive, like a small city of discarded treasures.

Wandering among the piles, he inspected various objects, wondering how they’d come to be there. Some were self-explanatory — Fanged Frisbees and other Zonko’s paraphernalia, forbidden books and half-empty bottles of firewhiskey. Seemed this was a popular spot for students to rid themselves of incriminating evidence. But other items piqued his curiosity, especially the ancient tomes and a handful of potions he didn’t recognize, their contents shimmering beneath the torches on the walls.

Pausing, he frowned as he examined a bust of an unfortunate looking warlock, wondering why anyone would’ve gone to the trouble of dressing it up. And yet... he stepped closer, squinting at the tiara that rested on its head. The lone sapphire glinted strangely, seeming to beckon him forward, to reach out and touch...

“No,” he said aloud, startling himself with the sound of his voice. Whatever it was, he knew Dark magic when he felt it, and had no intention of handling any suspicious jewelry without knowing the nature of the curses it might hold. He wasn’t Dumbledore, after all.

Dumbledore... that ring, as battered and tarnished as the tiara Severus was staring at now. That bloody ring, which had turned out to be a Horcrux. Could it be? The Dark Lord seemed to have a penchant for jewelry. *Old* jewelry, clearly significant in some way. Hadn't the ring appeared to be some sort of heirloom?

Suddenly, he remembered the one person who might know. Lily. She'd spied on Dumbledore's meetings, which was how Severus had found out about the Horcruxes in the first place. But her communication had been extremely limited at the time, only allowing her to cover the basics. What else did she know? Could she help him figure out whether the tiara was indeed a Horcrux?

Perhaps... though in the meantime, it seemed best to leave it alone.

"Accio wand," he muttered as he forced himself to step away.

More than a dozen wands flew in his direction, bouncing off the shield he managed to toss up just in time. Long wands. Short wands. Skinny wands and fat ones, in an impressive array of colors. Satisfied, he knelt down and gathered them up, slipping them into the pockets of his robes.

And then with one last, suspicious glance at the tiara, he turned and left the room.

"Lily?" he called when he entered his quarters a few minutes later.

When she didn't respond, he headed for the bedroom, smiling as he spotted her nestled among the pillows. She was sound asleep, curled up on her side with the blankets pulled all the way up to her chin.

Well, their conversation about the Horcruxes would simply have to wait.

He laid the wands on the bedside table, scrawling a quick note before undressing and slipping into bed. More than anything, he wanted to reach for her, but he couldn't do that. And so he held his breath, just as he'd done every night for more than a week now.

Pathetic, but he'd even memorized the numbers. Two extremely lucky nights of falling asleep with her head on his shoulder. Waking up on three mornings to find her there. Five nights of sleeping on opposite sides of the bed, wishing she was in his arms.

And then there'd been *last* night, a memory that still made him cringe. Somehow ending up pressed against her from behind, his hips moving in a desperate attempt to create friction through layers of clothing. He hadn't even realized what he'd been doing until he'd awakened himself with a shuddering groan, swiftly followed by a gasp of horror. Thankfully, Lily had still been asleep, completely oblivious as he'd sprung from the bed and hurried to the bathroom, cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

Well, that wouldn't happen tonight.

Grabbing a couple of pillows, Severus placed them in the middle of the bed. Much better, he decided with a grim nod. If he felt the need to rub against anything in his sleep, it would at least be an inanimate object this time. Still embarrassing, yes, but far less likely to earn him a slap to the face. Unfortunately, the barrier would also prevent Lily from crossing the space between them, depriving him of the bliss of waking with her in his arms. But such precautions were necessary unless he wanted to start sleeping on the couch.

Closing his eyes, he felt himself relaxing, soothed by the sound of her soft breathing. He was nearly asleep when the Dark Mark started to burn.

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*“Evanesco.”*

Lily sat at the table in the study, surrounded by three piles of wands. Eight had already made it to the “no” pile, while two had qualified as “maybes”. Coughing as acrid smoke filled the room, she added a ninth to the rejects, scowling at the short, stubby thing before turning her attention to a slender wand with garlands of ivy etched around the base. It was a couple inches longer than her original wand, not as swishy, and crafted from a different wood. But as soon as the handle made contact with her palm, a flurry of red sparks shot from the tip, like it was rejoicing at her touch.

“I like you, too,” she said with a smile. *“Evanesco!”*

Her breakfast leftovers disappeared.

“Wonderful! What shall we try next?”

An hour later, the quarters were spotless, her clothes freshly cleaned, and the magically warmed air carried a subtle scent of autumn spices. She then set about shrinking a variety of objects — miniature quills and tiny books, doll sized robes and miniscule goblets. By then, she was positively giddy, drunk on the rediscovered power that surged through her body.

Transfiguration was her next test, one that had her laughing aloud as she attempted to create the most hideous decorating scheme imaginable. Lime green wallpaper with garish pink stripes, shag carpeting in a vivid shade of orange. The elegant chairs became fluorescent beanbag monstrosities, and the tables were changed from mahogany into cheap pressboard, speckled with a wild array of colors.

She stepped into the bedroom, chuckling in amusement as she gazed at the four poster bed. And then with a flick of her wand, it reshaped itself into a perfect replica of a bed she’d seen in one of the dirty Muggle movies James and Sirius had liked to watch. It was shaped like a gigantic heart, with round pillows made out of cheap satin and fuzzy leopard skin blankets.

Smirking to herself, she turned her attention to the wardrobe in the corner.

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Severus didn’t make it back to Hogwarts until well after dawn, so tired he could’ve lain down and fallen asleep right there at the Apparition point. But of course, that was out of the question... he didn’t even have time to return to his quarters for clean robes, let alone indulge in a nap. Nothing to do but face the day, hoping that an Invigoration Draught and lots of strong black coffee would be enough to keep him on his feet.

At least he’d had the forethought to arrange Lily’s meals the night before, kept warm and fresh with a Stasis Charm. His own eating habits were another matter entirely, as he’d skipped both lunch and dinner the previous day. Well, that would soon be remedied if he could just make it back up to the castle.



Yawning, he trudged across the grounds, shielding his eyes against the harsh sunlight. He didn't even notice the cat until it darted into his path, coming to an abrupt stop right in front of him.

"Lily," he said, his first, automatic response. But of course, it wasn't Lily anymore, just an ordinary housecat.

Bending down, Severus gave her a scratch under the chin. "I was wondering what happened to you. No permanent damage then?"

The cat looked as healthy as ever, with bright eyes and a glossy calico coat. Strange, but even without Lily's soul in residence, she had a sharp, intelligent look about her, as if she could've told him the secrets of the world if she'd chosen to do so. Whatever it was, Severus couldn't help feeling responsible for the creature, and it occurred to him that she might make an ideal companion for Lily. Though Lily had yet to complain, she had to get lonely during those long hours of solitude. Perhaps the cat would be a comfort to her.

"Come on," he said, picking the cat up and tucking her inside his robes. "Someone's waiting to see you."

An hour later, he was settled in the headmaster's office, nibbling on a piece of toast as he sifted through the mountain of paperwork that had piled up overnight. How did it accumulate so quickly? And how had Dumbledore managed to find time to gallivant around the countryside with such a demanding job?

As if sensing his thoughts, the portrait behind him cleared its throat.

"He summoned you last night, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And were you not going to say anything?"

Severus sighed, setting his toast back on the plate. "There isn't much to report. He still has no idea where the boy might be, nor are there any possible leads aside from those that have been planted by the Order. That's why we were summoned — certain persons have been asked to investigate these leads further."

"Not the kind of meeting that would take all night though, surely?"

Now more than ever, Severus wished Dumbledore would bugger off. Not that he was trying to conceal anything, but he was beyond exhausted and simply wanted to eat his breakfast in peace. Why was it necessary to talk about it right this minute, when he had no urgent news to report?

"It wasn't the meeting that took all night. After the others left, he taught me how to fly."

"Without a broom?"

"Naturally." Severus rolled his eyes. "I can hardly see him teaching me something I've known how to do since I was 11 years old."

"Interesting. Did he give you any reason?"

“Said I was entrusted with the protection of his greatest stronghold. That if it becomes necessary for me to defend Hogwarts, I should be able to do so with every possible advantage he can give me.”

“Sound logic, I’m sure.” Dumbledore looked pensive, as if wondering how this new development might prove useful. “Did he say anything else?”

“Nothing important.”

“I see. Then he’s happy with your performance as headmaster so far?”

Severus shrugged. “Seems so.”

“Good. It’s crucial that you remain in his good graces for as long as possible.”

“I know.”

Following that, Dumbledore left him alone to finish his breakfast. Once he had a full stomach and a good deal of caffeine running through his veins, he began to feel better, finishing half his paperwork before he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Enter,” he barked, and Alecto’s squat little figure waddled into the room. She was dragging Longbottom by the arm, her fingernails sinking into his skin like the teeth of a steel trap.

“Headmaster, forgive me for disturbing you, but you said offenses that went beyond the deduction of house points...”

“Should be reported to me, yes. What did the boy do?”

Alecto stepped forward, slapping a roll of parchment on the desk. “This... this *filth*! I assigned a short essay for my students, which was *supposed* to be about Muggle inferiority. And he just... *look* at it!”

“I’m looking,” Severus said absently as he unrolled the parchment and began to read.

### **Muggles Are NOT Inferior**

*an essay by Neville Longbottom*

*I don’t think Muggles are inferior to us.*

*Sure, they don’t have magic, but look at everything they’ve been able to do without our help. They have ships and cars and airplanes, televisions and telephones and all sorts of things that don’t exist in the wizarding world. They can even make light without fire or casting a spell, which tells me that they must be pretty smart. Besides, they’re just like us in all the most important ways. They have their own feelings and personalities, love their families and want to protect them, read books and like sports, even have pets like we do.*

*I don’t think wizards are better than Muggles, and I don’t think Muggles are better than wizards. We’re just different, that’s all. I think we should try to understand those differences rather than...*

There were several more paragraphs, but Severus didn’t bother to read them. He had the gist of it.

“Well, Mr. Longbottom? What do you have to say for yourself?”

He expected the boy to cower before him, but instead, Longbottom lifted his chin in defiance. “I did the assignment, sir.”

“Your *assignment* was to explore inferiority,” Alecto snapped. “Not deny its existence!”

“So give me a bad grade. I don’t care. I stand by everything I said.”

“You little blood traitor! *Cruc...*”

“*Enough!*” Severus rose to his feet, reaching out to push Alecto’s arm down with a great deal more force than was necessary. “While I agree that Mr. Longbottom is out of line, I’d prefer to discipline him myself. The boy clearly has a rebellious streak that may require more... *drastic* measures. Besides, isn’t your next class starting soon?”

Alecto nodded, seeming to relax as she absorbed the darker implications in his words.

“Well then, off with you. I assure you that Mr. Longbottom will be dealt with in an appropriate manner.”

“Yes, Headmaster,” she said, bowing her head in acknowledgment. And then with one last, evil glare at Longbottom, she turned and left the room.

For several long moments, they stood in silence, until Severus said, “Sit down, Mr. Longbottom.”

“Going to torture me? Kill me? Why don’t you go ahead and get it over with? I’m not afraid of you!”

Choosing not to call attention to the boy’s shaking hands, Severus repeated himself. “I said, *sit down*, Mr. Longbottom. Don’t make this more difficult than it has to be.”

“*I didn’t do anything wrong!*”

No, he hadn’t. That was the worst part. He’d written a sensible, well thought out essay, which Severus himself would’ve awarded with an E (albeit grudgingly). More than that, this newfound bravery was rather more tolerable than the spineless cowering of years past. It was just a pity that Severus had been tasked with the job of stamping it out of him, that it was necessary to do so for the child’s protection.

“You ignored instructions. You openly defied your teacher. And now, you’re choosing to ignore a direct command from your headmaster. Do not play the innocent.”

Withdrawing his wand, he pointed it at the boy, stung by the flash of terror in his eyes. Granted, he’d been a bastard over the years. More times than he could count. But had he *ever* harmed a child at this school? Why did any of them think he’d do so now?

But he knew the answer to that. It all came back to the man reclining in the portrait behind him, deep in feigned slumber. That man had painted him out to be a murderer in the eyes of the world, and now, he had no choice but to live with the consequences.

“Sit down,” he said for a final time, then flicked his wand without waiting for a response. Longbottom plopped down in the seat, managing to look both furious and relieved. “Now, are you done wasting my time with your foolish resistance?”

The boy opened his mouth as if to speak, but seemed to think better of it. Instead, he nodded mutely, giving Severus a sullen look.

“Very well, where were we? Oh yes... your punishment. Twenty points from Gryffindor for failing to complete the assignment according to your professor’s instructions. Another ten points for talking back to her. Twenty points for shouting at me, and let’s see... three detentions for defying my orders. I believe Filch has been cleaning out the storerooms on the sixth floor. You will assist him, starting tomorrow at 9 PM.”

“That’s all?”

“If you find your punishment insufficient, I can certainly...”

“No, no, I just thought...”

“Thought I intended to torture you? As pleasant as that sounds, Mr. Longbottom, I have more important things to worry about just now. That said, I’d suggest you keep in mind that your punishment today is merely a warning. Do not expect me to be so lenient in the future.”

“Yes, sir.”

Glancing at the bloody furrows on the boy’s arm, Severus sighed, then reached into his top drawer. “Here,” he said stiffly, sliding a tiny vial across the desk. “Apply that to your injuries. They should be gone by morning.”

Longbottom looked surprised. “Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s no act of kindness, I assure you. I just don’t see the point in you missing classes over an untreated wound that has festered. Or missing detentions, for that matter. Now get out.”

“Yes, sir.”

---

Following that, Severus needed a break. He couldn’t spare more than a few minutes, of course, but even a brief escape was better than nothing. Besides, he was eager to take the cat to Lily. She’d been curled up in the corner for a couple hours now, sweet and placid despite the intrusions. Yes, definitely a good companion.

Cradling her in one arm, he pushed the tapestry aside, slipping into the blessed privacy of his quarters.

“What the fuck?”

Lily came out of the bedroom, flashing him a brilliant smile. “I decided to redecorate.”

He glanced around the sitting room, cringing when he saw what she’d done to his favorite chair. Once an elegant antique made out of mahogany and smooth black leather, it was now a shapeless monstrosity, covered in shiny, banana colored fabric.

“Yes,” he said wryly. “I can see that.”

“Like it?”

How was he supposed to respond to that? Granted, he suspected it was a prank on her part, but what if it wasn't? What if she genuinely *liked* the changes she'd made? Frankly, the fact that his quarters looked as if a circus had vomited all over them wasn't half as bad as the thought of hurting her feelings.

"I... like the fact that your magic seems to be working. Quite well, from what I can see. Found a wand that suits you?"

"It's wonderful," she said, stepping forward and holding it out for his inspection.

It was a pretty thing, slender and graceful, much like Lily herself. He could see that it was made of cedar, though he had to take it from her and perform a diagnostic charm before he could determine the core.

"*Kneazle* hair?"

She laughed, accepting it back and then gazing down at it with newfound understanding in her eyes. "Of course. I inhabited a Kneazle back in Harry's third year, and I guess I developed a kinship with them. Cats in general, really."

"Speaking of cats..." He glanced around, looking for the creature he'd set down as soon as he'd entered the room. She was seated just a few feet away, giving them a peculiar look. "I've brought something for you."

"Oh, you found her! I was afraid she'd been hurt... lost. Where has she been all this time?"

"Hiding in the Forbidden Forest, I expect." He couldn't help a small smile as she scooped the cat into her arms, holding her close. "I take it you'd like to keep her?"

"Mmmm..."

Seeing that she was distracted, he went into the other room, staring in horror at the neon colored garments in his wardrobe before restoring one of his robes to its original state. Yes, definitely a joke.

"I have to go now," he said as he entered the sitting room again, though she barely seemed to hear him. She was seated on the couch with the cat in her lap, murmuring intently in its ear. Strange, though Severus didn't have time to give it much thought. He was due for a meeting with Minerva in less than five minutes.

"Lily?"

She looked up at him, obviously startled. "Hmmm?"

"I'll, ah... see you later this evening."

Responding with a distracted nod, she immediately returned her attention to the cat.

## 40. The Unknown Helper

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### Chapter 40: The Unknown Helper

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“Who are you?” Lily murmured, careful to keep her voice low. “Please, I’m not going to hurt you.”

The cat didn’t respond, but Lily felt a rush of emotion, complex and distinctly human. Fear, bewilderment, a twinge of hope, each battling for dominance until the connection was broken by the sound of someone calling her name. Startled, she looked up to find Severus staring down at her, his brows knitted, a peculiar expression on his face. Should she share her suspicions? No, not yet. He had to get back to work, after all, and would only end up worrying about it for the rest of the day.

Besides, the cat wasn’t an Animagus, so it couldn’t be an immediate threat.

That was the strange part. She *knew* this cat, had inhabited it herself until a couple weeks ago. So this new presence had to be someone like her, under the effects of the same spell that had saved her life. But how could that have happened? To the best of her knowledge, no one even knew about that spell other than Severus and herself.

Well, except Voldemort.

Distantly, Lily heard the door close as she glanced down at the cat with a newfound sense of trepidation. What if it was a Death Eater? Someone Voldemort had intentionally struck down in order to create a more effective spy? What if he’d sent them here to keep tabs on Severus? Her mere existence in his quarters was proof that he wasn’t exactly being honest with his master. But what else had this creature, masquerading as a cat or in some other form, managed to overhear?

“Who are you?” she repeated more firmly. “If you’ve come here to spy on him…”

*Please.* The word that flashed through Lily’s mind was soft and tremulous, the voice clearly belonging to a woman. *Please, I don’t understand what’s happened to me, but I’m no friend of You-Know-Who. He’s the one who killed me... or tried to, anyway. They captured me... there was a meeting, and... I kept saying, ‘Please, Severus. Please. We’re friends.’ He didn’t do anything, didn’t lift a finger, and I began to think he was just like them. Didn’t even realize what he’d done at first, just... there was a flash of green light, followed by the most terrible pain. I thought I was dying... already dead. The light faded, and... oh god, the snake was eating me...*

Her jumbled thoughts trailed off, replaced by an echo of harsh, wracking sobs that made Lily’s eyes well up in sympathy. “It’s okay,” she whispered, keeping her voice soft and soothing. After giving the woman several minutes to compose herself, she said, “Can you tell me your name?”

*I'm Charity. Charity Burbage. I used to be...*

"The Muggle Studies teacher?" Lily couldn't help smiling, remembering the sweet faced woman she'd often seen around the castle over the past few years. And then her expression grew more somber as the pieces fell into place. "That's why they captured you, isn't it? Because your teachings went against all that pure-blood supremacy crap?"

*I wrote an editorial in defense of Muggle-borns. Foolish thing to do, really, times being what they are. But I felt that I had to stand by my principles.*

"Not foolish. Brave. I'm Muggle-born myself, and I can't tell you how much..."

The cat gave her a strange look. *So was she. Lily Potter, I mean. I've only seen a couple photographs of her, and that was a long time ago, but the resemblance is uncanny. When I first saw you, I almost thought... and then he called you Lily, and... but that's impossible. Lily Potter has been dead for almost twenty years.*

"And Charity Burbage was killed a couple months ago," Lily said gently. "Yet here we are."

*So you're saying...?*

"Yes. I'm very much alive, even if most of the world doesn't know it. The reason I know what you are, why I can communicate with you, is because the same thing happened to me. It's an old charm, one that most people have never even heard of. *Ligatis Animalia*."

The cat sat silent for a long time, obviously struggling to process such a huge revelation. Finally, her voice echoed in Lily's head again, quiet and filled with awe. *Did he save you, too?*

"Severus? No... well, not in the way you're thinking. You-Know-Who cast the original spell. Killed me and saved me with a single breath."

Charity's feline eyes grew wide. *But why would You-Know-Who...?*

"I've never been sure. Not completely. I know Severus asked him to spare my life, and I guess that had something to do with it. Beyond that? I don't know, though I have a few theories. Severus says he's always been fascinated with anything having to do with life and death. Magic of the soul. I think he stumbled across that spell, and I gave him the perfect opportunity to try it. Either I'd survive and be a reward for Severus, or I wouldn't. Regardless, it would get me out of the way so he could go after his real target."

*So he knows you're alive?*

Lily shook her head. "No, I don't think so. He was gone for more than a decade, and by the time he came back... well, if I was still alive, I'm sure he thought someone would've figured it out by then. Besides, he hasn't tried to find me, which he would've done if he'd had even the slightest suspicion I was still around. Would've wanted to use me to blackmail Harry, among other things."

*That makes sense.*

"He probably just assumed that the spell didn't work. That it wasn't real in the first place, or that he'd gotten the timing wrong. From what I understand, it has to be cast right at the

moment of death. A second too early or too late and it's useless."

*Severus must've thought the same thing with me.*

"Yes, which has to be why he hasn't mentioned it. I'm sure he feels like he failed you, even though..."

*Wait a minute, Charity interrupted. You say it's the same spell, and you're... well, you're human now. Does that mean there's a way to fix this? To get my body back? Well no, that would be impossible. After what happened with the snake...*

"No, you can never get it back," Lily said quietly. "But you *can* regenerate your human form. It's just the shell, after all. Your soul is fully intact."

*How is it done?*

"Blood magic. Willing sacrifice. I think Severus got a hold of my sister's blood somehow, though he's never admitted as much. He used his own to strengthen it, and there was a photograph of me... I'm not entirely sure how it worked, but I think magical photos carry the essence of a person, the way portraits do. Everything but the soul. And I already *had* the soul, so..."

*I think I understand. Though that would be a problem in my case, since I have no idea where my family is. I sent them into hiding a few days before I submitted that editorial. Risking my own life was one thing, but I wasn't going to put them in danger. Mum is old and frail, and my brother Chadric is... well, he's a Squib.*

"There's no shame in that."

*No, Charity agreed. But he had no chance of defending himself either. Thankfully, he was smart enough to understand that. They both promised to stay in hiding until the war is over. Or forever, if it doesn't go our way.*

"That's probably for the best."

*Yes... though it also means I'm stuck like this, doesn't it? At least for the foreseeable future.*

Lily leaned forward, giving her a sympathetic look. "I know it isn't easy. I lived as an animal for sixteen years, without knowing if the spell could *ever* be lifted. But at least for now, I really think you're better off this way. No one knows you're still alive. And even if they did, if they tried to kill you..."

*Oh, I know. Charity shuddered. After it happened... I don't know if I was a bug or what, but I was perched on the wall. Lucius Malfoy walked by, and I saw this huge hand swooping down on me. The next thing I knew, I was outside, much larger and I had the ability to fly. It would've been amazing if I hadn't been terrified out of my wits.*

"You were a bird of some type?"

*A sparrow.*

"I always loved switching to birds." Lily said with a smile. "So what happened after that?"



*I had no idea what to do, but it seemed like my best option was to try and make contact with the person who'd cast the spell in the first place.*

"Severus."

*Yes, I saw him muttering to himself right before I was hit with the Killing Curse. Once I'd recovered from the shock, it all made sense, you know? God, Lily, it was awful. They had me suspended over the table, and that was after two full days of torture. I hardly knew what I was saying. I remember begging him to save me, too terrified to realize that he couldn't have done it even if he'd wanted to. That monster would've just killed us both. And yet he still found a way, knowing he was taking a huge risk in doing so. I knew then that he couldn't be evil.*

"No," Lily said quietly. "He isn't evil."

*So I decided to wait for him. Not sure how long it was, maybe a week? I figured he'd come back sooner or later, so I stayed there in the woods. Then one night, I saw two figures passing through the trees, dragging a third between them. They dumped him on a hillside, unconscious and bleeding, and walked away. He didn't have any clothes on, nothing to cover himself with. They'd dropped his things at the bottom of the hill, and he couldn't even reach them. He tried... pushed himself up a couple times, but he was so weak that he couldn't...*

Lily didn't realize she was crying until Charity trailed off, giving her a sympathetic look.

*Do you want me to stop?*

"No," she said, grabbing a scrap of parchment off the table and transfiguring it into a handkerchief. "No, I need to hear this."

*Well, that's the worst of it, really. They must not have realized how bad off he was, because I don't think they left him out there to die. But he would have. He'd already lost so much blood and had no way to help himself. He just lay there shivering, fading in and out of consciousness. I didn't know what to do, how I could help him...*

"But you did," Lily interrupted. "You must have."

*Yes, thanks to a fortunate accident. An owl swooped down on me, ready to devour me whole, I'm sure. I made eye contact with it, and then the strangest thing happened. I remember thinking if I could just be that owl, I could do something. That it would give me the strength I needed. I'm sure you know what happened after that.*

"You figured it out much sooner than I did," Lily said with a watery smile. "Took me years."

*Well, I don't think I would have if I hadn't been desperate. Anyway, I was able to bring his things over while he was sleeping, then flew to a Muggle town that wasn't too far away. Stole the food right out of some poor woman's grocery cart. It wasn't much, but...*

"You saved his life."

*Maybe. Maybe not. Thank heavens the man was smart enough to carry an emergency potions stash in his coat. He was able to heal himself up pretty well.*

"I..." Lily paused to wipe her eyes. "I don't know how to thank you."

*Oh, there's no need for that. He helped me, I helped him. Seems like a fair exchange. Besides, any decent person would've done the same.*

"Still, I can't tell you how grateful I am. The thought of losing him..."

*You care about him very much, don't you?*

"Yes," Lily said, and then feeling awkward, quickly changed the subject. "So how did you get back to Hogwarts? You flew?"

*I did. I've been back for several weeks now, watching him come and go. I just had no idea how I was supposed to communicate with him. Thought maybe I could spell out a message, which is why I switched to the cat. But I didn't know what to say.*

Lily laughed, leaning forward to cast a warming charm on a long forgotten teapot. "Oh, trust me. I know what that's like. Took me years to get through to him. So much easier with Sirius... oh, that reminds me! You *can* communicate with Animagi, you know."

*Really?* Charity looked intrigued.

"Yes, though you'll want to be careful with that. Very careful."

*Is that how Severus found out about you? Sirius told him?*

"Oh, no," Lily said, shaking her head vehemently. "I tried for more than a year, and he just kept refusing. He hated Severus, you know, and..."

*But it was your choice. Not his.*

"That's what I thought, too. Unfortunately, he didn't see it that way. His loyalty to James had a lot to do with it, I think. Would've felt like he was betraying a friend."

*I'm sorry about James. Sirius, too.*

Lily gave her a wistful smile. "Yeah. They both died far too young. James especially."

*You must miss them very much.*

"It's strange, really. They'll always have a place in my heart, but my memories of James feel like they're from a different life. Another world. I hardly remember what he looked like, how I felt about him, why I married him in the first place. I was so young, after all, and it's been twenty years. So much has happened since then. So much has changed. And Sirius... I haven't even begun to process that one yet. It still feels unreal."

*People say that Harry looks a lot like James.*

"I suppose," Lily said, her voice thoughtful. "But to tell you the truth, when I look at him, I don't see James at all. I just see Harry. He shares similarities with us both, but he's his own person. Too many people fail to see that, you know? Like Sirius trying to get him to act out like James, always telling him what James would've done in any given situation. I don't think he ever looked at him without seeing a reflection of his father. I guess that's understandable in some ways, but..."

*It has to be frustrating.*

“Yes. Harry has always had *someone* telling him who he’s supposed to be, pushing him in one direction or the other. Like when Dumbledore...”

*That’s the one thing I don’t understand*, Charity interrupted. *If Severus is on our side, how could he have done something like that? I mean, you can’t deny that he did it. There were multiple witnesses.*

Lily nodded. “And I was one of them. I guess... well, I shouldn’t tell you this, but you already know enough to condemn him if you ever chose to reveal it. So just promise me...”

*I won’t say a word. I swear.*

“Well, about a year before that happened, Dumbledore did a foolish thing. He put on a ring that carried a dangerous curse. A curse that would’ve killed him in a matter of hours if Severus hadn’t intervened.”

*Is that why his hand turned black?*

“Yes. Severus managed to slow the curse down, but at most, Dumbledore only had a year to live. And so he made Severus agree to kill him when the time came. Severus argued against it, but in the end, he was given no choice.”

*Well, I understand that Dumbledore wouldn’t have wanted to suffer. Better to have it over with quickly and all that. But why not do it in private, make it look like he’d died of natural causes? And why did Severus pretend to turn traitor, if... my god! That was intentional, wasn’t it? He wanted Severus to look like a murderer!*

“Yes,” Lily said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “You see, You-Know-Who ordered Draco to kill Dumbledore. He wasn’t expected to succeed, but either way, Dumbledore wanted to protect him. He left it in Severus’s hands, both as a way to shield Draco and to prove loyalty to the other side. Knowing he was going to die anyway, he wanted him to be in a position to take over as headmaster after he’d passed. To play to the other side while keeping the Death Eaters at bay.”

*Poor Severus. Now everyone...*

“Hates him,” Lily finished grimly. “I’ll never forgive Dumbledore for that, and I’ll never stop believing there could have been a better way. But it’s too late to change it now. I only hope that when this is all over, we’ll be able to clear his name.”

*I hope so, too*, Charity thought back at her. *Severus isn’t always easy to get along with, but he’s a good man at heart. Even after Dumbledore was killed, I think I still knew that deep down. Otherwise, why would I have begged him for help? Panicked or not, I would’ve known it was a lost cause.*

Lily nodded, her eyes filling with tears again. “If you knew how much he’d done... what he’s *still* doing... for Harry and everyone else besides. I don’t know whether we’ll win this war, but if we do, it would’ve never been possible without his help.”

*Does Harry know? About you, I mean.*

“No. Sometimes I think I should have told him. Months ago. Years ago. But up until recently, I didn’t know if it would even be possible to be restored to human form. It just... hurt too much. I couldn’t bear the thought of letting him know I was alive if I couldn’t be the

kind of mother he deserved. One who could talk to him, hug him, wipe away his tears. I felt so useless. Inadequate. I know it doesn't make sense, but..."

Charity gave her a compassionate look. *I think I understand. I might not be a parent myself, but I've been taking care of children for most of my life. I would've never come to Hogwarts if I hadn't felt like I had something to offer. Adults are different, but children are supposed to be able to rely on you. It takes a lot to feel like you deserve their trust. Their love.*

"Yes. Rationally, I knew that *something* would be better than nothing. But emotionally, that was harder to reconcile. Even now, I don't know how I can begin to apologize for everything he's been through. Everything I wasn't able to protect him from. His miserable childhood, growing up with my repulsive sister. Not being there to comfort him when he was grieving for the Diggory boy, or Sirius, or..."

*What happened to you wasn't your fault, Lily. I'm sure he'll understand that.*

"Maybe, but I still can't help feeling guilty... like I should've done more."

*From what I've seen, that's true for every parent.*

"Perhaps." Lily smiled, then glanced over at the clock. "Wow, we've been talking for hours. Hadn't realized how late it had gotten. Are you hungry?"

The cat bobbed its head.

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It was after 9 PM when Severus finally sat back in his chair, stretching until his joints popped before tapping his wand on the desk. A large platter of sandwiches appeared, along with a package of lemon flavored biscuits. Satisfied, he gathered them up, already halfway across the room when he was interrupted by a soft shuffle behind him.

"I thought you didn't care for those."

Sighing heavily, he glanced back over his shoulder at the portrait. "Pardon?"

"Biscuits. Whenever I served them to you, you always ate all the chocolate, maybe a few with raspberry filling. Never touched the lemon."

"I... I've developed a taste for them as of late."

"And a bigger appetite in general, I see. *Six* sandwiches?"

"Yes, well..." Severus trailed off, silently cursing the man for being a nosy old bastard. "I'm hungry. Haven't eaten since breakfast."

"You've been taking a lot of food into your quarters lately. An *unusual* amount, one could say."

"So?"

"Just seems curious, that's all. Especially since you appear to be *losing* weight rather than putting it on."

“What exactly are you suggesting?” Severus said, exasperated. “It’s late, and I’m tired. I’m not in the mood to stand here and tiptoe around the issue all night.”

“Very well. What I’m suggesting is that you’re not the only one living in those quarters.”

Severus didn’t bat an eyelash, for all that he was panicking on the inside. “Of course not. As I’m sure you’ve noticed due to your keen observational skills, I happen to have a cat. See? She’s right here.”

Indeed, the cat had materialized from behind the tapestry, weaving herself around his legs.

“A cat who enjoys lemon biscuits and veggie sandwiches?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore sat back in his painted chair. “Most peculiar things... such as ordinary animals turning out to be unregistered Animagi.”

“Do you really think I’m too stupid to know the difference?”

“No, not at all! Merely suggesting that you might be choosing to keep that information to yourself.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “And if I was? I don’t recall ever agreeing to report on the company I keep in my private time.”

“Times have changed,” Dumbledore said, fixing him with a penetrating stare. “I shouldn’t have to tell you how crucial it is that you... guard your secrets. If you’re hiding someone in your quarters, I’m sure you believe that they can be trusted. Who knows? Maybe you’re right. But we can’t afford to take that risk.”

“So according to you, my only option is total solitude? That I can’t do what needs to be done unless everyone hates me?”

“We agreed...”

“I *agreed* to protect Lily’s child. Nothing more.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

Severus let out a bitter laugh. “Let’s see. I don’t even know where he *is*, nor can I hope to be close enough to intervene if his life is threatened. Wouldn’t matter if I was, really, since he and his little friends would either curse me on sight or run screaming in the other direction. You made sure of that. So all I can do is sit here at Hogwarts, hoping like hell that this won’t be the day that I open the *Daily Prophet* to read that he’s been killed.”

“Severus...”

“Although I suppose it doesn’t matter, since as you say, the boy is destined to die no matter what I do. The *one* thing I wanted, the only vow I made, is doomed to end in failure. All thanks to that bloody Horcrux you never saw fit to tell me about, trapped inside him like some goddamned ticking time bomb.”

Dumbledore opened his mouth and closed it again, shaking his head in denial before he finally whispered, “How did you know?”

“Oh, I know a lot more than you realize. All your secrets, all your lies...”

“Whatever I’ve done has only been...”

“For the greater good,” Severus interrupted. “Yes, I know, and despite myself, I’ve come to believe in that same cause. So strongly that I intend to see this through to the end, regardless of any reservations I have. But to do that, I will rely on my own judgment. I will keep the company I choose to keep. I will listen to your counsel when necessary, but I will *not* have you scrutinizing my every action like some fussy old nursemaid. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take my *cat* and retire to my quarters. I’ve had a long day.”

“Severus...”

Ignoring him, Severus pushed the tapestry aside, slipping through the door with the cat close on his heels.

“Lily?”

She was standing in the doorway of the study, wearing a smile so brilliant that all his concerns were at least temporarily forgotten. The corners of her mouth were twitching, like she could barely restrain herself from blurting out whatever it was that had her so excited.

Intrigued, he brushed past her to set the platter on the table, then sat down on the couch.

“What is it?”

She scooped the cat up and came to sit beside him, holding it out like some priceless treasure.

“Do you know what this is?”

Giving her a strange look, he said, “A cat?”

“Yes, but *more* than that. You’ll never guess!”

“Well, despite Dumbledore’s suspicions, I know for a fact that it can’t be an Animagus. So...”

“It’s Charity. Charity Burbage!”

## 41. Moonlit Confessions

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### Chapter 41: Moonlit Confessions

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Severus stared at the cat, stunned, before shifting his attention back to Lily.

“How do you know?”

“I can communicate with her. In my head, like I did with Sirius. She told me everything.”

“Everything?” he echoed, a cold knot of fear forming in his stomach as he recalled the scene the cat had just witnessed. But no, Lily couldn’t have known about that. Even if there’d been time for Charity to tell her, he couldn’t imagine her reacting the way she was now, all sparkling eyes and brilliant smiles.

“That you saved her.” Lily said, giving the cat a scratch under the chin. “You used the charm and saved her life. Right there in a room full of Death Eaters.”

“I saw a chance and I took it. That’s all.”

“If someone had seen you...” She trailed off, shaking her head. “It was a brave thing to do, Severus. Very brave.”

Part of him wanted to bask in her praise, to believe himself worthy of the open admiration in her eyes. Indeed, he hungered for it, with all the single-minded desperation of a drowning man clutching at a liferaft to keep himself afloat.

And yet it was fleeting, insubstantial, a dream waiting to shatter in the face of harsh reality. He’d saved one life, yes, but what about the others? Had he shown his courage when he’d ignored those cries coming from the cellar, telling himself there was nothing he could do? Was he *brave* in hiding the biggest secret of all, convinced that the revelation would destroy them both?

“Charity says she wishes she could tell you how grateful she is.”

Severus glanced at the cat again, responding with a stiff nod. Despite his inner turmoil, he couldn’t help feeling a warm glow of triumph, relief at having one less death on his conscience. True, what he’d done might still have consequences if he didn’t proceed with caution. But having proven yet again that he wasn’t quite the heartless, murdering bastard he appeared to be? That was... *comforting*.

“No one can know,” he told them. “If anyone suspects that she’s alive, it will be traced back to me. Not that I’m particularly concerned about my safety, but with the war... my position...”

Lily laid a hand on his arm, effectively cutting him off. “I know. We’ve already talked about it, and we agreed that it’s best for her to stay this way until the war’s over. That can’t be long now, can it?”

“No,” he said quietly. “It can’t.”

She nodded, apparently satisfied. “Besides, with her family in hiding, we don’t have much choice. Isn’t that one of the ingredients... blood from a relative?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, we’ll just take care of it later. After the war, when it’s safe for you both.”

“Of course.” No need to mention that he’d probably be dead by then. “For now though, it’s been a long day. I think I’ll get some sleep.”

“Aren’t you going to eat something?”

He was about to refuse, but the concern in Lily’s eyes was harder to ignore than his empty stomach. Picking up a sandwich, he took a large bite, then wrapped the rest in a napkin. “I’ll just finish this in the bedroom. Goodnight, Lily. Charity.”

Only when the door closed behind him did he relax, letting out a sigh of relief as he sat down to remove his boots. Naturally, he was glad Charity had found her way here. It was the safest solution for them all. But that didn’t mean it was the most comfortable arrangement, as there were few things he valued more than his privacy. Lily was the only exception, a welcome intruder into what was otherwise an extremely guarded existence.

Shedding his robes and frock coat, he extinguished the lights before slipping into bed. He’d lied to them both, really. Yes, he was tired, but nowhere near the point of feeling like he could sleep. What he’d wanted was a chance to talk to Lily, free from the awkwardness he’d felt upon learning they had a silent audience. Of course, he knew Charity wasn’t a threat — she couldn’t have exposed their secrets even if she’d wanted to. But it still went against his instincts to reveal too much in the presence of listening ears.

Then again, it wasn’t that simple, was it? No... deep down, his reasons were far more selfish than that. He *liked* having Lily all to himself, the one person he could talk to without any need for caution (well, for the most part anyway). Didn’t matter if they were discussing Horcruxes or just chatting about the weather. It was a level of comfort he’d never felt with anyone else, and he keenly felt the loss of it.

Pathetic, really... almost as pathetic as the way he kept staring at the empty space beside him, hating the fact that she wasn’t there.

Turning onto his back, he let out a heavy sigh. Was he back to sleeping alone? It seemed likely. She wouldn’t want to give Charity the wrong impression, for one thing, and it wasn’t like he was her only source for companionship anymore. She had a friend now, a confidant, someone to relieve the isolation that had made her cling to him for so long. True, she might still need him in *some* ways, but...

“Severus?”

His head jerked up, eyes fixing on the silhouette in the doorway. “Lily?”

“I thought you’d be asleep by now.”

“No,” he said softly. “Did you need something?”



She stepped forward, her features illuminated beneath a shaft of moonlight. Beautiful... so indescribably lovely that it took him a moment to decipher the expression on her face. Was that *uncertainty*?

"I don't need anything. I was just tired, and thought... but if you'd rather I didn't..."

He nearly laughed out loud, torn between incredulity and sheer relief. The idea of Lily thinking she might be *unwanted*...

"I'd rather you did."

"Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't have said so if I wasn't. Come."

She hesitated, then crossed the room, slipping into bed beside him. "I wasn't sure if you were worried about what Charity might think, or..."

"Not particularly."

"Good." She turned on her side to face him, prompting him to do the same. "Me neither."

Choosing not to attribute any deeper meaning to that statement, he changed the subject instead. "Did you get her settled?"

"Yes. I transfigured that tacky ottoman into a cat bed."

"The purple one with the spangles?" he asked, smirking when she nodded. "A relic from Dumbledore's tenure, I'm sure."

"She's the one who helped you, you know."

"What?"

"When you were punished, and they left you outside. She brought your things over when you were unconscious. Food, too."

"I... didn't realize. I've wondered about it now and again, but..."

Lily let out a shuddering sigh. "By the time you made it back here, you were... well, not fully recovered, but nothing like she described. Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry. If I'd known how bad it was..."

"Don't," he interrupted, alarmed by the tears shimmering in her eyes. "Really, I'm fine now. No use dwelling on it."

"Okay." She sniffled, then gave him a watery smile. "I understand if you'd rather not talk about it, but I meant what I said. I think you're very brave. Not only for that, but..."

"I'm no hero, Lily. I just... do what I have to do. Speaking of which, what do you know about Horcruxes?"

"Horcruxes?" She blinked, obviously thrown by the change of subject. "Well, I already told you some of it. You know that Dumbledore was showing Harry memories from You-Know-Who's past?"

He nodded.

"I think he believed the Horcruxes might've been hidden in those places. Like when he showed Harry the cave. And then later, that's where he took him on the night he..."

"Died," Severus said flatly. "Yes. What else did he show him? Any mention of jewelry? Heirlooms?"

Lily's brow furrowed, and then she nodded. "That first night, they were looking at memories of You-Know-Who's family. Pure-bloods on his mother's side, terribly inbred. Said they had no fortune left, just a couple of heirlooms. Harry spotted the ring — the broken one with the black stone. He asked Dumbledore if it was the same ring he'd spotted in the memory, and Dumbledore said it was."

"Interesting. What else did he say?"

"Nothing, really. He explained how You-Know-Who's parents ended up together, but refused to answer any direct questions. Wouldn't tell Harry why it was important for him to know any of this."

Severus snorted. "Typical."

"Tell me about it."

"And the second meeting?"

"They talked about a locket. Slytherin's locket."

Severus felt his breath coming a little faster. "A Founder's object?"

"Dumbledore said it was, that it had been tested and everything. Someone tricked her into selling it off..."

"The Dark Lord's mother?"

"Yes. Such a sad story. His father was a Muggle, did you know that? She tricked him into marriage, and when he realized what she'd done, he abandoned her. She was alone, pregnant and desperate for money, which was why she sold it."

"Muggle cowardice," he said, unable to disguise the bitterness in his voice. "Well, I can't say I'm surprised."

"Severus!"

"So that *wasn't* cowardice?"

She frowned. "I didn't say that. But the fact that he was a Muggle doesn't necessarily mean..."

"Oh, it does."

"How can you say that?" She didn't look angry, just disappointed, which was infinitely worse. "Plenty of Muggles are perfectly decent. Wonderful even. My parents were..."

"Some of the kindest people I've ever known." Severus sighed, struggling to find the words he needed. "I... I'm not some foolish teenager anymore, Lily. I don't think all Muggles are bad, nor do I see them as inferior. It's been a long time since I thought that way. But

prejudice happens on *both* sides, and I've seen too much suffering to pretend otherwise. The way your sister treated you..."

"The way she treated *Harry*," Lily whispered.

"Yes."

"I'll never forgive her for that."

"I'm sure. Just as I've never forgiven my father for what he did to my mother."

She reached out, sliding her fingers through his. "That's it, isn't it? You see the similarities?"

"Rather more than you might realize."

"Will you tell me?"

If anyone else had asked him that question, he would've told them to fuck off. But Lily? He took a deep breath, determined to get the words out. "My mother never told him she was a witch. Said she didn't see the point. They'd only known each other for a couple months, after all, and I don't think she'd ever entertained the thought of marrying him. Their relationship was an act of rebellion on her part, a means to avoid a match that had been arranged for her practically since birth. She never told me who it was, just another pure-blood like herself."

He squeezed her hand, swallowing hard before he continued. "Back then, it was all very proper, especially amongst the older families. Marriage ceremonies often came with a prerequisite, during which the bride's... intimate history was scrutinized. One charm to determine virginity, and if necessary, a second to reveal the identity of her partners."

"That's terrible!"

"Yes."

"So your mother...?"

"She knew that failing the first test might not be enough, as such indiscretions were frequently overlooked. After all, if every witch who'd previously fooled around with a wizard or two had been deemed unworthy of marriage..."

"The magical population would've died out centuries ago," Lily finished for him, managing to look both disturbed and faintly amused.

"Indeed. So the only solution was to find someone as *unsuitable* as possible. A Muggle. Not just any Muggle either, but the most objectionable Muggle she could find. Needless to say, she did a smashing job at that."

"So what happened? I mean, if she had no intention of getting pregnant... she was a witch..."

"Yes, and a clever one at that. But she couldn't have predicted her family's reaction, which proved to be the fatal flaw in her plan. They broke her wand, locked her up in her room for weeks. No preventative charms, no access to potions that might've put a stop to my untimely conception. By the time they let her out, she was too far along to hide her condition. Nothing to do at that point but let it run its course."

“Oh, Severus...”

“Prior to that, I think they only intended to punish her, then forget it had ever happened. But with a permanent reminder... one she refused to give up for reasons I can't begin to understand...”

“Love.”

“Perhaps.” He shrugged. “At any rate, they turned her out. Struck her from the family tree, and that was the end of it.”

“How old was she?”

“Nineteen, I believe. Nineteen and helpless, without means to support herself. Even if she'd been able to find a job, I don't know how she would've tolerated employment in our world. The stigma would've been bad enough, but from what I understand, her condition was hard on her physically as well. Unusually so.”

“So she went to your father?”

“Yes.”

“And he took her in?”

Severus nodded. “Things were all right in the beginning. He had a decent job back in those days, said he'd always wanted a family. A *big* family, to be more precise, which proved to be his first disappointment. The night I was born... well, she never went into detail, just said it was clear she wouldn't be able to have more children. Told me that was the first time she'd ever seen him drink himself into a stupor.”

Lily gazed at him for a long moment, green eyes brimming over with sympathy. And then finally, she said, “He still didn't know about the magic?”

“Not at that point, no. She had another wand by then, but she hardly ever used it. Certainly not when he was around. Again, I proved to be the catalyst.”

“Accidental magic?”

“Indeed.”

“How old were you?”

“Too young to remember. I started a fire, apparently.”

“Were you angry?”

He shook his head. “Cold. It was always so cold in that house. Don't know why she never cast warming charms — would've been far less obvious than a basket of laundry going up in flames.”

“No kidding.”

“There'd been minor incidents before — summoning objects I shouldn't have been able to reach, broken toys that mysteriously repaired themselves. She was able to hide most of it, but there was no denying the fire. Not when I did it right in front of him. Needless to say, he went

ballistic, ranting about demons and hellfire, all that superstitious Muggle nonsense. Threatened to call in an exorcist.”

“And your mother?”

“She told him the truth. Wasn’t much choice, really. And well... nothing was the same after that. He treated us both like strangers, started drinking every night. Usually, he just ignored us, but when he was in a temper...”

“He hit you.”

“And I thought I was so good at hiding it,” Severus said, his lips curving into a humorless smirk.

“Oh, you were. I doubt anyone else suspected a thing. But I knew.”

“You never said so.”

“No,” she said softly. “Not that I didn’t want to, but you always tried so hard to pretend like everything was okay. I didn’t want to embarrass you or make you uncomfortable. Couldn’t see where it would’ve helped to force the issue.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He sighed, studying her eyes for a long moment before he spoke again. “What I needed was an escape. You gave me that, long before I was able to run away to Hogwarts every year. With you, I... it was the first time I ever felt like I was important. Like what I said made a difference. All your questions, your curiosity... the way you turned to me for answers...”

She smiled. “I was insatiable. Must’ve driven you crazy after a while.”

“Never. You made me believe I was someone else. Something more than a pathetic kid whose father beat the shit out of him on a regular basis. Just the way you looked at me, I...” But then he trailed off, abruptly clearing his throat. “It was what I needed at the time. That’s all.”

Thankfully, she didn’t push the issue. “So what you were saying earlier, about Muggles...”

“Right. I don’t hate Muggles. I hate a certain *type* of Muggle.”

“No different than witches and wizards,” she murmured.

“What do you mean?”

She propped herself up on one elbow, gazing down at him with a hint of amusement in her eyes. “Well, it’s the same on both sides. There’s always someone who thinks they’re better than others, that people deserve to be punished for being different than them. Magic, or lack thereof, has nothing to do with it. Sometimes an asshole is just an asshole.”

He let out a bark of laughter, which was followed by an intense, overwhelming desire to kiss her. Only when he thought about the consequences did he come to his senses, flipping onto his back with a long-suffering sigh.

“Yes, that’s what it is. I hate assholes. Rather unfortunate that I happen to be one of them.”

“Oh please,” Lily huffed, reminding him of her younger self. “You are *not* an asshole.”

“I could list any number of offenses that would prove otherwise, but we haven’t got all night. As it is, it’s already... shit, it’s one in the morning. How the hell did that happen?”

“Well, there’s this thing called the sun. The earth revolves around it, you know, and...”

“Thank you, Lily.” He rolled his eyes, though his lips were twitching. “Now, is there anything else you can tell me about the Horcruxes? The condensed version, if you will.”

“All right, where were we?”

“The Dark Lord’s mother. Abandoned by her husband, sold off the locket...”

“Oh yes,” she said, her expression growing serious. “I don’t know if I mentioned her name, but it was Merope. Merope Gaunt. And her husband was...”

“Riddle?”

“Yes, Tom Riddle. Well, she sort of gave up after that. Died when her baby was born or shortly thereafter. He ended up in an orphanage, which is where Dumbledore first met him. Dumbledore mentioned a cave that night as well, a place where You-Know-Who liked to torture other children. Also said he enjoyed collecting trophies...”

“Did he say anything about a tiara? A diadem?”

Lily frowned. “No. But the locket was mentioned again in the next meeting, along with a cup. Dumbledore made it clear that the cup was another Founder’s object.”

“Hufflepuff’s Cup,” Severus whispered.

“You-Know-Who was obsessed with Hogwarts, drawn to objects that were important to its history. He tracked down the cup and locket, murdered some poor elderly witch to get his hands on them. Dumbledore believed he would’ve been searching for the others.”

“Six Horcruxes,” Severus said slowly, ignoring his knowledge of the seventh.

“The diary was one.”

“Yes, as well as the ring, both of which have been destroyed. That leaves the locket, the cup, Nagini... and a sixth that remains unidentified.”

“Dumbledore said that Gryffindor’s only known relic was safe.”

“The sword.” He nodded. “Yes, I know. So that just leaves Ravenclaw, whose most famed object was the...”

“Diadem,” she finished for him. “The *lost* diadem, which hasn’t been seen in hundreds of years.”

“Oh, I beg to differ.”

“What?”

“I’ve seen it myself. Quite recently, as a matter of fact.”

Lily was sitting up now, her eyes growing wider by the second as she studied his face. “Where?”

“The Room of Hidden Things. I stumbled across it when I went to get the wands.”

“But how can you be sure...?”

“I wasn’t. Not until tonight. It was old, tarnished, didn’t look like anything special. But when I got close, I *felt* it. Something dark, familiar... impossible to describe, really. I already had my suspicions, but after what you’ve told me...”

“We have to destroy it.”

“It’s not that simple.” He sighed, turning over to face her again as she laid back down. “Dumbledore seemed to think it needed to be done in a certain order. The instructions he left for... for Harry...”

“Fuck Dumbledore,” she said almost savagely.

“Lily...”

“No, I mean it. He’s been dead for months, and he’s still controlling everyone’s lives. Your life. Harry’s life. Aren’t you sick of it, Severus?”

“Yes, though that’s hardly the point. The fact remains that there’s a lot we still don’t know. There could be consequences...”

“Like what?”

“Well,” Severus said, his voice thoughtful. “I don’t think he intended for the Dark Lord to realize what was happening until most of the Horcruxes had been destroyed. To weaken him as much as possible before...”

“Exactly! Which is why we need to...”

“Just hear me out. Please.”

She nodded, biting her lip as if that was the only way she could keep the words from spilling forth.

“This is a matter of strategy. With every Horcrux that’s lost, the chance increases that the Dark Lord will find out. Can you see why it would make sense to destroy the others first?”

“So the confrontation will happen here, rather than off in a cave or some other unguarded location?”

“Precisely,” he said, pleased as always with her quick mind. “Hogwarts might be a school, but it’s also a stronghold. The greatest one we have. If the boy can lead the Dark Lord here, we’ll have advantages that wouldn’t be possible anywhere else.”

“That makes sense. Still doesn’t explain why Harry has to be the one off hunting Horcruxes though. He could’ve been smuggled into the castle, hidden in the Room of Requirement. He could’ve stayed up here with us and no one would’ve known the difference. Aren’t these rooms unplottable?”

“Yes,” he replied, trying not to shudder. Charity Burbage was one thing, but The Boy Who Lived hanging around in his study, lounging on the couch like he owned the place...

“Well, I suppose it’s too late now. I just hate the thought of him being used as bait. Granted, You-Know-Who would’ve come after him either way, but if he’d stayed here, if the Order had taken care of the Horcruxes...”

“I know.”

“Do you think he’s all right?” she whispered, her voice small. “Out there all alone?”

“Yes,” Severus said firmly. “He’s... clever. More than adequate with defensive spells, adept at escaping dangerous situations. Besides, he’s not alone. He’s got the Granger girl... probably the most brilliant student I’ve ever taught, loath as I am to admit it. And then there’s Weasley. Rather dimwitted, true, but he’d throw himself in front of a horde of Inferi to protect the other two.”

To his surprise, Lily chuckled. “Was that painful?”

“Excruciating.”

“Well,” she murmured, and he held his breath as he felt the weight of her head on his shoulder, the warmth of her body pressed against his side. “Thank you for your willingness to suffer on my behalf.”

Just as he started to relax, remembered how to inhale and exhale, she lifted her head. Her face was in shadow, but it moved closer, closer, followed by soft lips brushing against his cheek. She pulled back a little, hesitated, and for one wild moment, he thought she might... that she wanted him to... but no, that wasn’t possible, was it? He lay frozen, paralyzed by doubt, hoping like hell for a sign. Not something that could be misinterpreted, but unmistakable proof that his advances would be welcome, that she *wouldn’t* recoil in horror if he pressed his lips to hers.

That proof never came... not that he’d expected it to.

Instead, she laid her head back down, letting out a barely audible sigh. “Goodnight, Severus.”

“Goodnight,” he said, suppressing a sigh of his own.



## 42. The Right Moment

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### Chapter 42: The Right Moment

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Lying awake in the darkness, Lily sighed softly as Severus's warm breath tickled her ear. One of his arms was wrapped securely around her, firm, almost possessive, his fingers resting on the curve of her hip. An intimate touch... far more suggestive than he would've allowed if he'd been aware of his actions.

Unable to help herself, she snuggled closer, her nerve endings tingling with awareness as the heat from his body penetrated the thin fabric of her nightgown. She held her breath as his hand slid lower, moving in a brief, reflexive caress before coming to rest on her upper thigh.

It was the same every night, equal parts temptation and torture. All those silent longings she didn't know how to express... the ever present desire he kept carefully concealed. Only when he slept did the truth reveal itself, his unconscious movements leaving her aching for more.

Yes, her feelings were impossible to deny. So why couldn't she act on them?

Twice now, he'd ended up pressed against her from behind, hips rocking back and forth in an effort to create friction between their bodies. It would've been easy to murmur her approval or even mimic his movements, making it clear that his attentions were welcome.

Instead, she'd lain frozen, pretending to be asleep when he'd woken with a gasp, then hurried to the bathroom.

Why? What was holding her back? Insecurity? Fear?

Both, it seemed. She hadn't had sex in nearly twenty years, after all, had only been human for a couple weeks. And while she'd often thought about it in animal form, that had been more of an emotional craving, the simple desire to feel close to someone. The physical part was something else entirely, plaguing her with questions she didn't know how to answer. What would be the best way to initiate it? What would it mean when she did? What if she got it wrong somehow, or proved to be a terrible lover? Was she even capable of pleasing Severus in that way?

Silly questions, perhaps, but she was a woman of little experience, most of which she barely remembered. The only man she'd ever slept with had been the polar opposite of Severus, always taking the lead, leaving her with nothing to do but go along for the ride. From holding hands to kissing, kissing giving way to heavy make out sessions. A hand sliding over her breast, pushed away the first time, left to linger there the second. Her robes providing a barrier at first, only to be discarded in favor of a blouse half unbuttoned, roaming fingers tugging at her bra strap, skirt hitched up a little more each time...

Until one day, they'd wound up in the Forbidden Forest, his naked body pressed against hers beneath the dappled sunlight. She'd barely understood how it had gotten to that point, hadn't stopped to ask herself whether she was ready. She'd simply let it happen, curiosity mingled with teenage hormones making sex seem like a foregone conclusion.

That first time hadn't been anything like she'd imagined. Just a few sharp thrusts followed by a howl of triumph, leaving her raw and aching in the aftermath. She'd lain there dazed, stunned by the realization that she was no longer a virgin, flashing James a weak smile as he'd beamed at her in delight. She'd kissed him then, had done all the things she'd thought she was supposed to do... none of which had involved telling him how much he'd hurt her or how disappointing the experience had been.

Right away, she'd learned to hide her real feelings where sex was concerned, a habit that soon became second nature. She kept quiet when he finished too quickly, leaving her restless and unsatisfied. And not once had she mentioned that a few hasty kisses while tugging at her knickers was *not* the kind of seduction she'd craved.

She hadn't wanted to hurt his feelings, of course, but that wasn't the only reason she'd kept her mouth shut. Embarrassment had definitely been a factor — actually *having* sex had seemed far less awkward than talking about it. Teenage insecurity? Perhaps, though she and James had never spent much time discussing their feelings, sexual or otherwise. Their relationship had been all about action — hanging out with friends, going on dates, sneaking off for a quick shag in a secluded alcove. Intimate conversations? Not so much.

If circumstances had been different, Lily found it hard to believe that she would've married him. Certainly not so soon after leaving school. But when her parents had died... when the war had started and her whole world was falling apart, James had given her the only security she'd had. He'd had the means to support her, had offered her a place to live when she'd had nowhere else to go. Perhaps it hadn't been an impassioned "can't live without him" type of love affair, but he'd given her all the things she'd needed during the most frightening time of her life. Familiarity, companionship, comfort... and yes, a marriage proposal. He'd offered her a chance to have a family again, the only thing that seemed like it might fill the void in her grieving heart.

It would've been smarter to wait. She'd known that, even at the time. Seventeen was far too young to get married, after all, and it had been hard to imagine spending the rest of her life with *anyone*, let alone her first and only boyfriend. But it had come down to need, fear, loneliness, and so she'd accepted, assuming that life would be easier after the wedding, that they'd finally settle down and the bond between them would deepen.

That had never happened. Not with friends popping in all the time, when one or both of them were constantly away on Order business. In truth, even Harry was a result of their frantic schedules, proof of how difficult it had been to focus on the practical aspects of their relationship. She hadn't *meant* to get pregnant, had simply forgotten to take precautions that day.

Not that she regretted it. On the contrary, nothing had made her happier than becoming a mother. But for a woman who'd been married, who'd borne a child, she knew precious little about relationships. James had been easy, never requiring more than a kiss or a smile to reassure him of her feelings. And when it came to sex, she'd simply had to lie beneath him,

willing and pliant, and his needs had been satisfied. He'd never seemed to expect anything else.

But Severus? Severus was the opposite of James, in every possible way. Ways that had frightened her in her younger years, ways she was only beginning to understand. With him, she couldn't just sit back and let things happen. He'd never be fooled into thinking she was happy if she wasn't, and he'd never take anything for granted. Unlike James, he'd hunger for *all* of her, not just the parts that were pleasant or fun, easy to appreciate at face value. Even with sex, it was hard to believe she'd find many similarities.

Severus would want... well, she didn't *know* what he'd want, and that intimidated her. It didn't matter how many times she'd slept with James. She was still an innocent in many ways, a fully mature woman whose only sexual experience amounted to youthful fumbblings. What did she know about pleasing a grown man, whose needs and preferences would obviously be far more complex?

How could she... not just give herself to him, but do so in a way that would leave him satisfied?

More than anything, she wished he'd say "fuck it" and take control of the situation, putting her insecurities to rest. She'd certainly given him ample opportunity to do so. But Severus wasn't James, of course, would never just assume his attentions were welcome. Even if he thought she might allow it, he'd probably worry about her doing so for the wrong reasons. Obligation, guilt, or worst of all... pity. Or he'd tell himself it was purely physical, that she was willing to sleep with him simply because there was no one else around.

And that was the other problem, really. It would've been easy to pull up her nightgown, wrap her legs around him in the darkness and let nature take its course. So easy, in fact, that she'd nearly acted on that impulse more times than she could count. She could've taken his hand, moved it to the place where she ached for him... woken him with a whisper, begging him to kiss her, touch her...

But it wasn't about making it happen. Not really. It was about making him understand *why* it was happening. How was she supposed to do that? Should she just blurt out the truth — that she was deeply and irrevocably in love with him?

She wanted to say "yes", to cast her doubts aside and surrender to her feelings. But crossing that threshold would mean there was no going back. To offer herself to him, only to change her mind... the consequences didn't bear thinking.

Perhaps it would be better to wait until their issues were resolved. True, they'd come to an understanding on most things, but what about Harry? They'd discussed him only briefly before she'd let it go, unwilling to criticize a man already torn apart by guilt and self-loathing. She'd realized that her forgiveness was more important in that moment, that some wounds needed to be healed before others could be treated.

Even now, she felt conflicted on the matter. On one hand, the way he'd behaved toward Harry at times had infuriated her. On the other, Harry had played his part, too, with his snarky comments and numerous acts of disobedience. He'd spent years making Severus's job as difficult as possible, though to be fair, it wasn't as if he'd known Severus was sworn to protect him at all costs.

And Severus *had* protected Harry, repeatedly risking his life in order to do so. That was the biggest factor of all, one that couldn't be ignored. How could she judge him over trivial matters like detentions or house points, knowing how much he'd suffered for Harry's sake? The countless sleepless nights, the perpetual strain... things that few men would endure for someone they loved, let alone a boy they could hardly tolerate.

Lifting her head, she studied his profile, reaching up to trace his strong jaw with the tip of her finger. Even deep in slumber, his forehead was creased with lines, his expression somehow managing to look both peaceful and guarded as he reacted to her touch with a barely audible sigh.

Seeing him in such a vulnerable state, she couldn't help picturing him on that hillside, naked and bleeding, victim of punishments she couldn't even begin to imagine. All for Harry... all because he'd deliberately thwarted Voldemort's attempts to capture the boy he'd been protecting for years. He'd tried to pretend like it was no big deal, but she knew him well enough to understand that Charity's version of events was closer to the truth. Without help, he probably would've died out there, alone and in agony.

That realization sent a cold chill up her spine, bringing home the realities of war and the precariousness of his situation. He could be summoned next week, tomorrow, even tonight, only to never return. Where would that leave her? Would she be comforted by the knowledge that she hadn't acted on impulse, that she'd chosen to wait for a right moment that had never come?

Or would she hate herself for letting fear stand in her way, regretting all the things that might've been?

The answer was obvious, as was her decision. And then suddenly, there was no more room for hesitation.

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He had to be dreaming. That was the only logical assumption. His reality didn't include soft kisses on his neck, the whisper of breath against his ear. It *definitely* didn't include a smaller hand closing over his, sliding it across a flat stomach, leaving it to rest on the most perfectly formed female breast he'd ever touched in his life. Dream or not, he latched onto it, his thumb grazing a nipple through a thin barrier of fabric.

The shudder he felt was unmistakable, as was the voice he heard, husky and filled with longing.

"Severus..."

"Lily," he murmured, already wondering when it would end. Dreams of her had always been fleeting, like his subconscious was incapable of seeing his fantasies through to their conclusion. Brutal, though he supposed it made sense. Making love to Lily was the one thing that really did surpass his wildest dreams.

And yet she was still with him, unseen but very much felt. Indeed, her presence was more real than it had ever been, delighting his senses with the sweet fragrance of lavender, the warmth of her body, the silky texture of her skin. He could even hear her breath this time —

slow, deep, slightly uneven. It tickled his cheek as he moved his hand across her chest, emerging as a soft moan when he found the neckline of her garment.

“Please, Severus...”

Oh, he liked that. Liked it so much, in fact, that the distinct ripping of fabric reached his ears before he realized what he was doing, his fingers coming into contact with warm, bare flesh. The need to move was desperate, though he tried to fight it, terrified he’d jar himself awake if he did so. A futile effort, to say the least. Surrendering with a long, shuddering sigh, he dipped his head down, finding his way by instinct until his mouth closed around a taut nipple.

His hand moved, too, sliding over her stomach and caressing her thighs before delving between them in search of more intimate pleasures. But he wasn’t to be so lucky, it seemed... just the briefest tickle of soft, downy hair against his fingertips, and then she pushed his hand away.

“Wait.”

“No time,” he mumbled, though he deferred to her wishes, returning his attention to her breasts instead. A satisfactory alternative for the moment, and far more than his dreams had ever given him before.

“Time for what?”

“Dream... don’t want it to end...”

“You think you’re *dreaming*?” She paused, and he heard a quiet chuckle. “But you’re not even asleep. I can tell by the sound of your breathing. Open your eyes.”

“No.”

“Please?”

Mutely, he shook his head, biting down ever so gently on her tender flesh. Savoring her warmth, her sweetness...

“Severus, just... shit...”

Her words trailed off, replaced by a throaty moan. The sound shot straight through him, finding its center in a part of him that was suddenly pressed flush against her, desperate for friction through the barrier of fabric that still held it captive. And then just when he felt her hands on his chest, followed by another soft murmur of “wait”, his ears were assaulted by a different sound. There was nothing pleasant about this one, a high, piercing shriek that bore an uncanny resemblance to the wail of a banshee. He screwed his eyes shut even more tightly than before, but the noise continued, until finally, he recognized it for what it was.

“Shit,” he snarled, and then several things happened at once. He grappled for his wand on the bedside table, casting a hasty *Lumos* as his eyes flew open. And there was Lily sprawled out beneath him, wearing an expression that could only be described as horrified. Her green eyes were wide and startled, nightgown ripped straight down the front, leaving her upper half exposed. Bare breasts, *beautiful*, though he hated himself for enjoying the sight when he spotted the reddening mark above the left one, a telltale shimmer on her nipples confirming that yes, his mouth had been there, and it sure as hell hadn’t been a dream.

Fuck. What had he done? Oh, this was bad. Very, very bad.

Unfortunately, there was no time to deal with the situation just yet, nor even to apologize. Nothing to do but scramble into his robes, shifting the fabric around to conceal what felt like the most massive erection he'd ever had.

"I... um, I'll be back soon," he sputtered as he thrust his feet into his boots. "Alarm... office..."

"Okay," she said, her voice small as she pulled the covers up to her chin.

Before he knew it, he was out the door, racing through the hallway, bursting into his office only to find it deserted. *Too late*, he thought, cursing under his breath as he went to check the stairs.

And there they were — two Gryffindors and a Ravenclaw, their faces stark white, eyes wide with fear.

"Back into my office," he snapped, propping the door open with one arm. "Now."

"Sir, we were just..."

"Do not attempt to placate me with your excuses, Miss Weasley. Mr. Longbottom? Hand me the sword." Again, he recognized a flash of defiance, but he was in no mood for it now. Yanking his wand from his sleeve, he pointed it directly at the boy, gratified to see him cringe. "*Accio sword.*"

Catching it in one hand, he returned it to its place on the wall before settling himself behind his desk.

"Sit down, all of you. I will not ask you twice."

The children scuttled forward, dropping into the row of seats that faced him.

"Now just a few questions, if you will. First, what were you hoping to accomplish with your little act of thievery? Did you honestly think that the disappearance of such a noteworthy object would go unnoticed?"

"No sir," Miss Lovegood said, looking at him with frank honesty in her eyes. "But if you hadn't come out when you did, you would've never known it was us."

"I see. And what were you planning to do once you'd smuggled it away?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I can't tell you that."

Severus stared at her, nonplussed. Granted, many students had defied him over the years, but none had ever managed to be so respectful while doing so. Deciding that the others were easier to deal with, he turned to them instead, fixing them with a cold, pitiless glare.

"A souvenir for your precious Potter, perhaps?"

"Of course not! We just..."

"Just assumed I was ignorant of the contents of Albus Dumbledore's will? That I wouldn't have expected some foolhardy Gryffindor to try a stunt like this, and indeed, that I wouldn't have been prepared for such an occasion? I fear you've underestimated me."

When no one spoke, he continued. "In any case, your reasons are irrelevant. I'm far more interested in your punishment."

"Expel us then!" Longbottom burst out, making the others jump. "If this is a school where students are punished for doing the right thing, then I'd rather not be here."

"The *right* thing?" Severus said, raising an eyebrow. "Since when is theft the right course of action?"

"*Theft*? That sword belongs to Harry! Dumbledore said..."

"Irrelevant, Miss Weasley. The sword you speak of belongs to this establishment, not one of its former headmasters... and *certainly* not some pigheaded, arrogant boy who..."

He deflected the hex with ease, flicking the wand out of the girl's hand almost lazily and then using his own to plop her back in her seat. "Try that again," he said, his voice deceptively calm, "and expulsion will be the least of your worries. Now, where were we? Ah, yes... your punishment. A week's worth of detention for each of you, I think."

"With the Carrows?"

"No, Miss Lovegood. With Hagrid. I understand he needs some assistance in the Forbidden Forest."

"But I already have detention with..."

"Filch," he said dryly. "Yes, Mr. Longbottom, I'm aware of that fact. Very well then — the three of you will begin on Monday night at 9 PM, after Longbottom's previous detention has concluded. Do not be late."

The children weren't smart enough to hide their relief, though he chose to ignore it, jerking his head at the door instead. "Out."

Once they'd gone, he buried his head in his hands, letting out a weary sigh. The night had started so well, talking in bed with Lily and then falling asleep with her head on his shoulder. And now... what bloody time was it anyway?

He didn't realize he'd voiced the question aloud until the portrait spoke from behind him. "4 AM. Well, 4:07 to be exact."

"Don't you ever sleep?" he said sourly.

"Oh, yes. Rather more than you do, I suspect."

Responding with a stiff nod, he rose to his feet.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to bed."

"There's a matter we need to discuss. The sword..."

Sighing heavily, Severus spun around to face the portrait. "Yes? Whatever it is, tell me quickly. It's been a long night."

"You must realize that it can't stay here. Not now. If Voldemort realizes how vulnerable it is under your care, how easily it might've fallen into the wrong hands..."

"What would you have me do?"

"Give it to Bellatrix. I'm sure she'd be more than pleased to store it in her vault."

"Bellatrix?" He gave Dumbledore an incredulous look. "Why would you even consider...?"

"Come closer, Severus. That's it. Now pull on the side of my portrait — the left side. Two sharp tugs should do it."

Holding his breath as the portrait swung forward, Severus peered into the cavity that lay behind it. It held a few odds and ends — ancient looking books, a Sneakoscope, a pair of brightly colored socks, and most inexplicably, a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. But then he spotted a glittering object leaning against the back wall, a perfect replica of the sword he'd just reclaimed.

"I take it this is the real one?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Do you really think I would've let it fall into the Ministry's hands? Or Bellatrix Lestrange's, for that matter?"

"I suppose not."

"Be ready to present it the next time you're summoned. The fake one, that is. You'll earn favor for having confiscated such a powerful object, and Bellatrix will be thrilled to keep it tucked safely away on her master's behalf. Meanwhile..."

"You want the real sword to go to the boy?"

"Yes, though not until the time is right."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Very well. May I go to bed now?"

"Just one more question."

"Yes?"

Dumbledore gave him a long, measuring look. "How did you know that Harry is a Horcrux?"

"You told me yourself. All that blathering about fragmented souls, how the boy must die..."

"And you put the pieces together... no pun intended."

"Yes," he said, affecting a tone of nonchalance. "Seven of them, to be exact. A diary, a ring, a locket, a cup, a snake... a diadem, I believe. And of course, the boy himself."

Falling silent, he watched in satisfaction as the color drained from the portrait's face, ruddy cheeks taking on an ashen hue.

"How?"



“You’re not the only one who happens to be exceptionally observant... or adept at keeping secrets, for that matter. Now if you’ll excuse me, I really must get some sleep. Goodnight.”

And with that, he turned and strode away, leaving Dumbledore speechless in his wake.

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Back in his quarters, Severus shrugged off his robes, removing his boots before creeping to the bedroom on silent feet. Cowardice, perhaps, but he’d hoped she’d fallen asleep, giving him a few more hours to come up with a proper apology. Alas, she was wide awake, propped up against the pillows with a book resting in her lap. She set it aside as soon as she saw him, watching him with guarded eyes.

“Is everything all right?” she said softly.

“Oh... yes. Just a minor disciplinary issue. Resolved now.”

“Good.”

For several moments, he just stood there, the awkward silence pressing in on him until finally, he could stand it no longer. He sat down on the bed, leaving plenty of space between them, swallowing hard before he spoke.

“What happened before... I’m sorry. It’s been a long time... a *very* long time, to say the least. Not that I’m excusing what I did, but I hope you know...”

“Severus...”

He held up a hand to stop her. “Please, just let me get this out. I hope you know that I’d *never*... that nothing like that would’ve *ever* happened if I’d been aware of my actions. I also want to assure you that I’ll be sleeping on the couch from now on. Clearly, I can’t be trusted to...”

“Severus, please. Just stop.”

Shutting his mouth this time, he forced himself to meet her eyes, knowing his own were filled with shame.

“What exactly do you think happened?” she said, her expression unreadable.

“Are you really going to make me say it?”

“I need to know.”

“Very well.” He sighed, staring down at his hands. “I became... aroused in my sleep, obviously. Thought I was dreaming, ripped your nightgown and... other things. I remember you pushing my hand away, but other than that... well, I don’t know how much of it was a dream, what I actually did, or...”

“You weren’t dreaming, Severus,” she said, her voice quiet. “What happened was real. But... no, please don’t apologize again. It was my fault, not yours.”

“*Your* fault?” He let out a humorless chuckle. “What kind of twisted logic would lead you to that conclusion?”

"Because I made a mess of things. Gryffindor impulsiveness... stupid, really. I thought I'd... and then you..."

"I don't understand."

"I was the one who initiated it. That's what I'm trying to say." She was avoiding his eyes now, but he caught a glimpse of reddened cheek through the curtain of her hair.

"Initiated it?" He frowned. "If you're trying to tell me that you touched me by accident, rubbed up against me while you were sleeping or something, that still doesn't excuse what I..."

To his surprise, she laughed. "Oh, there was nothing *accidental* about it. Trust me, I knew what I was doing... or thought I did, at least. The way you reacted... well, that was sort of what I was going for."

He stared at her, dumbstruck, unable to formulate a response.

"I should've waited until you were fully awake, I suppose, but I was thinking about the war, how uncertain everything is, and it just seemed so... *urgent*. Like if I didn't act immediately, I might never have another chance. I expected you to wake up right away, but then I couldn't get you to open your eyes, and the alarm started going off, and... I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen that way."

"You're *sorry*?" he choked out, having forgotten how to breathe. "You're telling me that you were attempting to... that you actually *wanted*... and you're apologizing to me?"

"I'm not sorry for wanting you," she said bluntly, finally meeting his eyes again. "Only that I was so clumsy in getting the message across."

"You want me," he repeated, just to be sure he'd understood.

"Yes."

"You were trying to..." Why couldn't he just say it?

"Seduce you, for lack of a better word," she said, her cheeks flaming scarlet. "Yes."

"But..." He trailed off, shaking his head in an attempt to bring clarity to a situation that felt even more dreamlike than what had happened earlier. Piece by piece, it came back to him then... not some shameful example of unprovoked lust, but the truth. Lily kissing his neck, her soft sighs tickling his ear. Lily taking his hand and moving it to her breast... arching into his touch... moaning her approval. So warm, so sweet and willing, and... *real*. All of it had been real.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he said after a moment, remembering the mark on her skin.

"No, you didn't."

"But then you pushed me away when I..."

She smiled, looking endearingly self-conscious. "Only because you thought you were dreaming. I wanted you to look at me, to see your eyes when you..."

"Tell me," he whispered, his voice ragged. "Please."

“When you made...”

Only then did he realize that there was no more space between them, faces mere inches apart as he knelt before her in the middle of the bed. His breath... soft pants sounding like thunder in the otherwise silent room. Her eyes eclipsing his vision, wide and green, blinding him to all else but the countless emotions flickering behind them. Something shy, something uncertain, perhaps even fearful... chased away by a brilliant flash of certainty that snatched his breath away, making him lean toward her as if she was his only source for oxygen.

And when she finally spoke again, it was no longer in the past tense, but very much the present.

“Make love to me, Severus.”

## 43. The Burden of Proof

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### Chapter 43: The Burden of Proof

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For several heartbeats, Severus did nothing but stare at Lily. He'd forgotten how to move, how to speak, hardly remembered how to breathe until he felt the air escape him in a ragged sigh. Words came back to him then, but he couldn't bring himself to voice them aloud. If this was happening — *really and truly happening* — the last thing he wanted to do was spoil it by asking if she was serious.

He reached for her instead, willing his hands to stop shaking as he brought them to her face. First one and then the other, thumbs ghosting across her velvety cheeks, fingers burying themselves in her hair. He moved closer... closer... until their faces were only inches apart, his breath mingling with hers as he gazed deeply into her eyes, trying to memorize precisely how they looked before his own fluttered closed.

And then he kissed her.

The first brush of his lips was gentle, tentative, a whisper of a touch as he waited for her to recover from whatever mad impulse had prompted her to allow this. But then the madness only deepened as she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him closer, her lips parting in silent invitation.

"Lily..." he breathed, just before his tongue delved into her mouth, tasting her warmth, her sweetness, a groan of approval rumbling deep in his chest as she melted into him, kissing him back with equal fervor. He didn't pull away until they were both panting, opening his eyes to find her cheeks flushed, her lips swollen, such an appealing sight that he ravished her mouth all over again before turning his attention to her throat.

He wanted to take his time, to savor every detail. The way she tilted her head back... the soft moan that escaped her as he blazed a trail of kisses up to her ear, nuzzling the delicate folds before tracing them with the tip of his tongue. The way her body felt in his arms, breasts pressed flush against him, heartbeat thrumming in perfect time with his own. His momentary panic as she pulled back, swiftly followed by a shiver of elation as she proceeded to unbutton his shirt with nimble fingers.

And then she was touching him, soft hands gliding across his chest, chasing away the last of his uncertainty. Emboldened now, he slipped the straps off her shoulders, dipping his head to kiss the mark he'd left earlier, tugging the fabric down to expose...

"Wait," she whispered. "Let me."

Rising to her knees, she reached for the hem of her nightgown, pulling it over her head in one smooth motion before settling herself against the pillows. She hesitated, then gave a little shrug and slid off her underwear as well.

Severus didn't know what he said in that moment. Something nonsensical, more than likely profane. But words ceased to matter as she stretched out before him, gloriously naked, smiling shyly as she offered herself up for his perusal. Brilliant red hair spread in a wild tangle across the pillow, green eyes soft and luminous beneath the candlelight. And her body... dear god, a thousand fantasies couldn't have prepared him for how beautiful she was, the mere sight of her stealing his breath away.

He was afraid to move at first, afraid that the illusion would shatter, convinced she was too perfect to be real. But then she held out her arms and something twisted inside him, sharp, almost painful, a lump forming in his throat as he lay down beside her. He captured her mouth again, his kisses slow and deep, his hand skimming over her flesh with gentle, almost reverent caresses. Ignoring his own body's needs, he focused on hers instead, attuned to every little sound or movement as he learned the best ways to please her.

After what had passed between them earlier, he knew she loved to have her breasts touched, that a thumb brushing across her nipple would never fail to elicit a soft whimper. He lingered there for a while before sliding his hand across her stomach, delighting in the way his touch made her shiver. Hesitant at first, he moved lower, but she made no protest now, her thighs falling apart at the lightest brush of his fingers.

"Mmmm," she breathed into his mouth, echoed by his own sigh of pleasure as he delved between them.

As soon as he touched her, he could tell that she was ready for him, her flesh already slick with arousal. The realization had him reaching down to unfasten his trousers, driven by a mad desperation to be inside her. But then he stopped himself, unable to forget that it had been a very long time. His ability to prolong the act seemed dubious at best, and considering that this was *Lily*, of all people...

No, he couldn't risk leaving her unsatisfied.

Pushing away the impulse, he began a gentle exploration instead, locating the tiny nub and stroking it with the tips of his fingers. It took him a few minutes to figure out the rhythm and pressure she preferred, and then she was writhing beneath him, her lower lip caught between her teeth in an obvious effort to suppress her moans. Switching to his thumb, he slid his fingers inside her, first one and then another, watching her eyes drift closed as she let out a breathy sigh. He kissed her then, murmuring wordless encouragements against her lips as his hand began to move. Slow and steady at first, gradually picking up momentum until finally, *finally*...

"Oh god..."

She started to tremble, small fist gripping the sheets, hips rising to meet his touch. And then seeing an opportunity, he couldn't help himself, increasing the friction by calculated degrees as he leaned over to whisper in her ear.

"Now."

The effect was instantaneous. She cried out once and then again, her face an exquisite mask of pleasure as her head fell back against the pillows, her body going limp.

He couldn't imagine anything more arousing than the sight of her lying there, her eyes opening to gaze at him in a hazy sort of wonder, chest rising and falling in time with the quiet pants that emerged from her parted lips. Her tangled hair, the slight sheen of sweat on her brow... he'd never known that a woman could look so beautiful in such a state, nor so thoroughly satisfied. And to imagine that this was all his doing, that she looked this way because of *him*...

A pang of longing shot through his body, a raw, desperate need that bordered on physical pain. Would this be the end of it then? If she'd merely been looking for release, which had seemed like the most logical explanation for her sudden interest, she'd found it. What reason would there be for her to proceed?

On the other hand... well, perhaps he was uncommonly pleased with himself at the moment, but he couldn't help thinking there was something more here, that she wasn't ready for it to be over either. The way she gazed up at him, her eyes soft and vulnerable, the feeling that there was some unspoken expectation hanging in the air between them...

Still, he had to ask.

"Do you wish for me to continue?"

"Yes," she said softly. "Please."

A sharp intake of breath and then he was kissing her again, hard, desperate, almost feverish this time, hands sliding over her body with a newfound sense of certainty. He didn't know which of them had unfastened his trousers, but suddenly, he was free, yanking them off with a grunt of satisfaction before rising to kneel between her thighs. A swift adjustment and then he hesitated, hovering at her entrance as he brought his eyes back up to her face.

She was holding her breath, her eyes squeezed shut, lower lip caught between her teeth. Her fingernails were digging into his shoulders, like she was bracing herself for the onslaught to come.

He was bewildered by her reaction, until suddenly, he understood. It wasn't just that she hadn't done this in nearly twenty years, though that would be enough to make anyone nervous. No, it was more than that. She didn't even possess the same body anymore, only a regenerated version of her previous form. And while logic told him she wasn't a virgin in technical terms, it must certainly feel that way from her perspective. After all, the beautifully naked form that lay beneath him now had never known the touch of a man. Not until tonight.

As much as he wanted to deny it, he couldn't help the fierce, possessive pride that surged through him upon that realization. To know that James Bloody Potter had never kissed these lips, never touched the breasts that were pressed against him now. That never, not *once*, had that arrogant bastard ever felt what it was like to be inside her. *This* version of Lily, the only one that mattered to him now, was all his own.

But of course, that was just her body. Her soul was still intact, her heart (at least in the metaphorical sense) hadn't changed. The secrets of both were still a mystery to him, and would remain so as long as he couldn't bring himself to ask the questions that would make everything clear. Was she still in love with Potter? Would that ever change? And above all else, why was she offering herself to him now? He still had the impression that her reasons

went deeper than a simple case of loneliness, but for all he knew, that was just wishful thinking.

These thoughts flickered through his mind in rapid succession, ultimately bringing him to the conclusion that it didn't matter. For tonight, for whatever reason, she was his and his alone. And in the end, that was enough.

"Open your eyes, Lily," he said, his voice gentle. "Look at me."

She cracked one open and then the other, flashing him a self-conscious smile. "I'm sorry. I just..."

"I know," he murmured, struggling to find the words to reassure her. "But you can trust me. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded, and he felt her relax.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know," she said, reaching up to touch his face, her lips meeting his in a soft, lingering kiss.

And then he felt her hips shift, responding to the unspoken signal by easing himself forward, pushing into her exquisite heat an inch at a time until he was buried to the hilt. "I'd rather die," he gasped, though he could no longer remember why he said it or what the context was. He knew nothing now but the indescribable bliss of being inside her, followed by the barely audible sigh that tickled his ear as he began to move.

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It was the wrong time to cry. Lily knew that, burying her face in Severus's neck as she fought back the tears he would no doubt misconstrue. But it was all too much... intense, overwhelming pleasure, beyond anything she'd ever imagined. His voice... his touch... his expression as she'd taken him into her body, dark eyes burning with naked emotion. He'd rather die than hurt her, he'd said, and she believed him, fully understanding at long last just how deeply he loved her.

And now she clung to him like a lifeline, hands gripping his shoulders, his occasional grunts echoed by her quiet moans. Her arousal simmered just beneath the surface, building by slow degrees as his hips picked up momentum, careful thrusts giving way to a smooth, steady rhythm. Indeed, it was all too much... bewildering, almost frightening. And yet somehow, she couldn't help wanting more.

"Lily," he rasped, and then she felt his hesitation, realizing he was trying to catch a glimpse of her face. "Are you all right?"

She looked up at him and nodded, stunned into silence by the hunger in his eyes. His expression was unlike anything she'd ever seen, equal parts ecstatic and tortured, his breath emerging in harsh pants as he scrutinized her face for any sign of discomfort. And then she realized he was still holding back for her sake, that only sheer, almost masochistic determination was keeping him in check.

"I don't think I can..." he sputtered, his hips starting to move again. "I need to... fuck..."

“I’m fine. Let go...”

Groaning in response, he pushed himself up on his arms, eyes boring into hers as he increased the speed, the friction, driving deeper with every thrust. In the end, his efforts to make it last were hardly necessary — she hadn’t realized how close she was until the climax shuddered through her, fingernails digging into his back as her world exploded all over again. She heard herself cry out, distantly aware of his awestruck expression as her senses reeled, leaving her breathless and shaken in the aftermath.

Severus obviously wasn’t far behind — head thrown back, body slick with sweat as he strained for his release. He made no attempt to pace himself now, his movements swift, almost punishing, and then faster still as she wrapped her legs around his waist to give him better access.

“Now, Severus,” she whispered, an echo of the command that had worked so well on her before. She hadn’t expected it to have the same effect on him, but it did, her name emerging from his lips in a ragged gasp as his hips jerked out of rhythm — once, twice, and then again, before finally going still.

He collapsed on top of her then, eyes closed, heavy pants tickling her ear as he buried his face in her hair. She rested her cheek against his forehead, waiting patiently for him to recover, grateful for the reprieve as she struggled to collect her thoughts.

Gradually, his breathing began to slow, the frenetic pace of his heart settling into something closer to a normal rhythm. And then finally, he lifted his head, sending her own heart plummeting as she spotted the expression that was suddenly guarded, felt the tension in his muscles that told her he was about to pull away.

It wasn’t difficult to understand his reaction. She hadn’t explained her reasons for sleeping with him, after all, and there was a big difference between the act itself and the intimacy that followed. Knowing how he felt about her, she could only assume he was trying to withdraw before she could, attempting to spare himself the pain of what must seem like an inevitable rejection. This was why she’d hesitated in the first place, fearful that he’d assume she’d merely turned to him for comfort, or out of a sense of obligation. At the time, she hadn’t known how to tell him the truth, afraid of opening her mouth only to find herself incapable of saying the words.

She still felt that way to some degree, but it didn’t matter. She had to try.

“Severus, I need to tell you...”

He froze, his expression cautious. “You don’t have to explain yourself. It’s all right.”

“But I want you to know why this happened. Why I...”

Shrugging noncommittally, he said, “I’m sure you had your reasons. Whatever they are, I accept them. I was just... glad to be of service.”

“Service?” she echoed, sitting up and clutching the blankets to her chest. “Severus, don’t be an ass.”

“My apologies. I only meant...”



And then suddenly, she understood why she'd wanted to avoid this moment. She'd known that the deeper implications in his assumptions would hurt her, even if she'd never consciously admitted it until now. It was easier for him to think that she'd used him to satisfy her own needs, easier to dodge the issue than stop to consider, even for a moment, that she might have genuine feelings for him. That was understandable in some ways, but then again, what did it say about *her*? Did he really think she was selfish enough to take advantage of someone who was so obviously in love with her? That *knowing* how he felt, she would've had no problem sleeping with him while offering nothing in return?

"I know what you meant," she said, alarmed to realize that her eyes were filling with tears. "You meant to give me an easy out, right? I mean, why would you need me to explain myself if you already figured that this was a one-time thing?"

"Well," he started, pulling the blankets over himself as he put a little distance between them. "Yes. I didn't mean to offend you, just thought it was best to avoid any unnecessary awkwardness."

"You're in love with me, aren't you?"

He stared at her, shocked, his mouth opening and closing as he struggled for a response.

"No, you don't have to tell me. I already know the answer. What's more, you *know* that I know. And yet you still seem to believe that I would *use* you..."

"I don't think you used me," he said quietly.

"That I'm such a shallow, self-serving bitch that I'd actually..."

"Don't be absurd," he interrupted, a hint of anger flashing in his eyes. "First, I could *never* think of you that way. Second, the suggestion that you *used* me would imply that there was nothing in it for me, that it was all about your needs rather than my own. That's hardly the case."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he held a hand up to stop her.

"Furthermore, being as you *are* aware of my... feelings, surely you must realize that I would've *killed* to be with you that way, *regardless* of your reasons for allowing it. The idea that it would've been kinder to deny me the experience, simply because you couldn't offer me *more*? Perish the thought."

"So that's how you see it?" she said, looking at him sadly. "You'll take what you can get?"

"Yes," he said simply.

"Because you don't think you deserve anything more."

"Hardly the point." He shrugged, letting out a heavy sigh. "The *point* is that you didn't use me, that I thoroughly enjoyed myself, and that you shouldn't blame yourself for what happened. Because I sure as hell don't."

She felt her eyes filling with tears again, though this time for a very different reason. Perhaps after all, it would've been better if he *had* thought she'd taken advantage of him, because at least that would've proven he valued himself enough to feel he had a right to better treatment. But then again, if he'd been capable of that, maybe he would've recognized the

truth that was staring him right in the face. As it was, it seemed she would have to spell it out for him.

“No,” she said quietly, staring down at her hands. “I don’t blame myself. I don’t, because despite what you might think, I would’ve never done this if I hadn’t had feelings for you. If I hadn’t been willing to give you more.”

“More?” he echoed, his voice faint. “Lily, what are you saying?”

She hesitated, sucking in a deep breath. “I... I’m saying that I’m in love with you.”

## 44. A World Beyond Dreaming

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### Chapter 44: A World Beyond Dreaming

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For a terrifying moment, Lily thought Severus might pass out. He'd gone ghastly pale, gripping the blankets with shaking hands as if trying to prevent himself from toppling over. She wanted to reach for him, to steady him somehow, but instinct told her that he needed his space, that any interference on her part would be too much just now.

"I'm sorry," she said instead. "I didn't mean to just blurt it out like that."

"*Sorry?*" He stared at her incredulously, dark eyes burning with some fierce emotion she couldn't identify. "You're *sorry*? Lily, you have *no idea*..." Unable to finish the sentence, he let out a choking noise, looking like someone who'd just taken a Stunner to the chest.

And then there was nothing but the sound of his harsh, unsteady breathing, a trickle of sweat appearing on his forehead before he swiped it away. He opened his mouth several times, only to close it again, the bewilderment in his eyes soon giving way to panic as he struggled to put an end to the awkward silence. And then suddenly, Lily knew what to do, flashing him a reassuring smile as she reached for his discarded undershirt and slipped it on.

"I think I'll have a bath."

"Wait! I don't..." He trailed off, looking utterly helpless. "Fuck... I'm making a bloody mess of this."

"No, you're not. Just find me when you're ready, okay?"

She leaned over, kissing him on the cheek before rising from the bed and heading for the door.

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Severus hadn't wanted Lily to leave. On the contrary, he would've preferred to keep her right there beside him... for now, and for the rest of his life if at all possible. And yet there was no denying the tension that drained from his body as soon as she was gone, followed by a sigh of relief as he sagged against the pillows.

Somehow, she'd understood what he needed, even when he'd been too dumbfounded to see it for himself. A few minutes of solitude, a chance to process what she'd said without feeling any pressure to respond. Attempting to pull himself together with her sitting right in front of him would've been infinitely more difficult, an exercise in humiliation as he'd floundered for the right thing to say.

Bless the woman for sparing him such an unfortunate scene, for giving him room to breathe as he struggled to come to terms with such a shocking revelation.

*I'm saying that I'm in love with you.*

After all, those were literally the last words he'd ever expected to hear from her, far beyond anything that could be responded to with a simple assurance that he felt the same. She'd flipped his world upside down with that statement, a lifetime's worth of conviction proven false in a single breath.

*I'm in love with you.*

Those words echoed through his mind, growing more insistent with every repetition. And then suddenly, he couldn't deny them anymore, couldn't fool himself into believing that he was dreaming, that he'd misunderstood, or even that she'd spoken out of some wild impulse of the moment. No, there'd been too much certainty in her eyes, a sincerity in her voice that told him more than the words alone ever could.

Lily loved him. She *loved* him.

His eyes began to water, a simple exhalation of breath emerging as a ragged sob. He fought to bring his emotions under control, until finally, he recognized the other reason behind this precious reprieve. She hadn't only been making it easier for him to pull himself together. She'd given him permission to fall apart.

"Muffliato," he choked out.

And then he wept... without embarrassment, without shame, without fear of judgment. Of course, he knew Lily wouldn't have thought less of him if he'd broken down in front of her — she'd already proven that. But being alone gave him the freedom to let go completely, without feeling like he was compromising his dignity in the process.

The fact that Lily had given him this, had recognized the need for it even before he had? For the first time in his life, Severus knew what it was like to feel truly understood, thought that it might be possible for someone to know him better than he knew himself. It was an idea he'd always dismissed as sentimental nonsense... though to be fair, he was starting to question a lot of things he'd once accepted as truth.

Indeed, this was a world he hardly recognized, one where the concept of "impossible" had ceased to exist. But then again, was it really so unfamiliar? After all, if Lily had taught him anything, it was that his reality could shift at a moment's notice where she was concerned. Nine years old, believing she'd never speak to him again after he'd botched their first introduction. At 15, convinced he'd lost her forever after he'd shouted that hateful word, and then knowing it for certain at 21 as he'd clutched her lifeless body to his chest, sobbing his fucking eyes out the way he was doing now, albeit for a very different reason.

And then the aftermath... all those years of misery and solitude, left with nothing to live for beyond protecting her son. Fifteen years of believing she was gone, dead, never to return, until the day he'd walked in to discover a handful of words scrawled across his kitchen table. Her survival... contradicting the world as he'd known it, standing in defiance against all the things that could never be.

Closing his eyes, Severus pictured himself in the Forbidden Forest, holding his breath as he'd stood beside a smoking cauldron. That first flash of red hair he'd glimpsed through the mist, green eyes wide with bewilderment as she'd stepped into his embrace. Just the latest of

countless miracles, yet still, he hadn't dared to hope for more. Not even when she'd lain in his arms at night, seeking closeness even as his subconscious had stubbornly insisted that it didn't mean anything. That she only clung to him for warmth, or comfort, or...

In retrospect, it all seemed so obvious. Why hadn't he recognized the signs? True, the subtle ones had been easy to ignore, but what about the others? The way she'd made a point of touching him when she'd had no reason to do so, that softness in her eyes whenever she'd looked at him? Asking him to *make love* to her, for fuck's sake... wouldn't she have told him she'd just wanted a shag if that was all she'd been after? No... she'd spelled it out for him, right then and there, and still, he'd refused to see it.

"Idiot," he muttered to himself.

And yet denial hadn't been a conscious choice. He'd spent years erecting his defenses, had shaped his entire reality around the belief that she could never, ever love him in return. Indeed, he'd done such an effective job that even when she'd given him reason to hope, he'd been incapable of recognizing it as such.

Even now, with her confession still echoing in his ears, he could hardly make sense of it. She said she loved him, yes... but *why*?

Rising from the bed, Severus strode over to the mirror, sucking in a sharp breath as he inspected his reflection. Even worse than he'd expected. His face was haggard, lines and shadows etched harshly into his skin beneath the early morning sunlight. Surprised, he glanced up at the window, wondering when the night had disappeared. And then he remembered... candles sputtering out... making love to Lily as the soft light of dawn had illuminated her features. So beautiful... the polar opposite of the ugly visage that stared back at him as he returned his attention to the mirror. Lank hair, sallow skin, red rimmed eyes, and an unflattering growth of stubble covering a jaw that was too narrow, too sharp...

Well, perhaps it had nothing to do with looks. Lily wasn't shallow, after all, would've never befriended him in the first place if she had been. She hadn't seemed to mind his shabby clothes or his unkempt hair, had never so much as mentioned his occasional lack of hygiene. Clearly, that hadn't changed... though there was a world of difference between being friends with an unattractive person and going to bed with them. Did she honestly find him appealing in that way? Or had she simply chosen to ignore his numerous flaws?

Reaching for his wand, he did his best to clean himself up before pulling on fresh robes. Another glance in the mirror and he felt a little better, realizing that at least some of the unpleasantness reflected back at him could be remedied. He was exhausted, for one thing, which accounted for the dark circles under his eyes and the unhealthy pallor of his skin. And of course, he often forgot to eat these days, which explained his gaunt, almost skeletal appearance. He ran a hand over his stomach, so flat it was almost concave, surprised to realize he was famished.

Yes, he needed to see about breakfast... for himself, and for Lily, too. Then there was Charity... shameful, but he'd more or less forgotten about her until now. And what about his job? Thankfully, it was Saturday, leaving him with much more freedom to come and go as he pleased. But he still needed to get word to Minerva, informing her that he wasn't to be disturbed until Monday unless the matter was urgent.

Pulling on his boots, he headed for the study, only to realize that Lily had already been there. She'd scraped a bit of tuna from their leftover sandwiches, putting it in a bowl for the cat who lay stretched out on the table, looking perfectly content.

"I need to step out for a minute," he said, feeling awkward at the thought of what she must've overheard. At the time, it hadn't occurred to him to cast a quick Muffliato, nor to even attempt to stifle his sounds of pleasure. "Ah, if Lily comes out before I return, can you let her know I'll be back soon?"

Bobbing her head, the cat gave him what he could only interpret as a knowing look.

"Thank you," he muttered, then turned and fled the room.

Soon enough, he was in his office, sifting through the small pile of paperwork that had accumulated overnight. Deciding there was nothing in there that couldn't wait, he scrawled a quick note to Minerva instead, handing it off to a house elf before leaning back in his chair to wait for her reply.

"Taking the weekend off, Severus?"

He responded with a brief nod, not bothering to glance back at the portrait.

"Are you ill? Injured, perhaps?"

"No."

"No," Dumbledore agreed, sounding thoughtful. "A bit tired, I'd say, but you look healthy enough."

"Your point?"

"Just seems unusual, that's all."

Severus let out a heavy sigh. "I have some personal business to attend to."

"Meaning?"

"That's none of your concern."

"We need to talk, Severus. I don't know what has happened to make you so... defiant as of late, but I shouldn't have to tell you what's at stake here. A single misstep, and we risk losing everything. You mustn't deviate from the plan, you *cannot*..."

"The plan?" Letting out a harsh laugh, Severus spun around to face the portrait. "Oh yes, the plan. *Your* plan. Which seems to amount to leading us all around by the nose, feeding us scraps of information while keeping the lion's share to yourself. Tell me... how can you expect me not to deviate from the *plan*, when I have only the vaguest idea of what that plan entails?"

"Well," Dumbledore said, his eyes taking on a hard glint as he leaned forward in his chair. "You seem to have figured out quite a lot on your own. So why don't you tell *me*, Severus... how did you find out about the Horcruxes? How could you have possibly gained access to secrets I only shared with Harry himself... information divulged within the complete privacy of this office?"

"A little bird told me," Severus shot back, smirking when he realized it wasn't far from the truth.

"Oh, I hardly think so."

"Indeed? Then what is your theory?"

"Legilimency, I'd say. Perhaps Veritaserum."

"You think I extracted the information from the boy by *force*?" He stared at the portrait, mouth agape. "You truly believe that I'd actually... after swearing that I'd *never*..."

"Vows are easily broken."

"Not mine."

"I'd like to believe you," Dumbledore said, his expression softening. 'But it's the only logical explanation — surely you must see that.' He paused, letting out a heavy sigh. "Really, I suppose I can't even blame you for what you did. I withheld too much. I knew that, even at the time. But I thought you trusted me, Severus. That if I kept things to myself, you would've assumed I had a good reason for doing so."

"*Trust*?" Severus gave him an incredulous look. "You lied to me for sixteen years, used and abused me to achieve your own ends, and you have the audacity to sit here talking to me about trust? I hardly think you know the meaning of the word."

"On the contrary, my boy. I..."

But Severus wasn't listening anymore. He sprung from his chair, snatching the note from the returning house elf before slipping behind the tapestry.

The bathroom door was still closed, for which he was grateful, the faint sound of splashing water reaching his ears as he sagged against the wall. For all his introspection earlier, his gradual awareness of Lily's feelings and what they might mean, he hadn't even considered the deeper implications. The war... her son's unfortunate fate, which he still hadn't found the courage to disclose. And beyond that, the awful realization that his own death was still inevitable, just when everything he'd ever wanted was finally within his reach.

For a wild moment, he wanted to storm into the bathroom, grab Lily and sweep her away to some distant location where they'd never be found. A tropical island, perhaps, or some remote cabin hidden in the forest, shielding them both with every bloody protective spell in his arsenal. He wanted to say, "Fuck the war." Fuck his duty, fuck Dumbledore and the Dark Lord and everything else that stood in his way. Why should they have any claim upon his life, his future, both infinitely more precious than he'd ever realized?

Why? Because he'd made promises, and despite what Dumbledore might think, he'd never been a man to break his word. Besides, what kind of life would that be for Lily? If he withdrew now, the Dark Lord would almost certainly win, leaving her with no choice but to remain in hiding for the rest of her days. And to lose her only child on top of that? He couldn't hope to save the boy in either case, but how much worse would it be for her to know that he'd died in vain?

Straightening his shoulders, Severus pushed himself away from the wall, his sense of purpose renewed. Yes, it was too late to turn back, even if he'd wanted to, which he didn't.

Not really. No... beyond Lily herself, all the promises he'd made for her sake, he had his own reasons for wanting to see the Dark Lord fall. Doing everything in his power to make that happen felt like the right choice, the *only* choice...

And if he was destined to die? Well, so be it. But he'd damn sure make the most of whatever time he had left.

With that thought, he stormed into the bathroom after all, albeit for a very different reason.

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"Severus?"

Lily looked up at him, startled, as he dropped to his knees beside the tub. He didn't even attempt to respond, breathing hard as his eyes swept over her face, her body, coming to rest on her parted lips.

"Are you all right? You look..."

Oh, he could only imagine how he looked... not that he cared. He kissed her fiercely, swallowing the rest of her words as he cupped her face between his hands, weaving his fingers through her damp hair. Afraid she might object, still scarcely able to believe his attentions were welcome, he breathed a sigh of relief as he felt her relax, her murmur of approval sending a shiver up his spine.

"Wait," she said after a moment, her voice soft and breathless. "Let me get out."

Standing up, he held out a hand to help her, not bothering to cast a drying charm before pulling her flush against his body. A wise choice, he realized, loving the way his hands glided across her slick skin. He released her, but only for a moment, nearly tearing his robes in his haste to get them off. Thankful that for once, he wasn't wearing anything underneath except his trousers, he unfastened them with one hand and shoved them down, groaning low in his throat as his erection sprang free into her waiting hand.

She hadn't touched him the first time... fortunate, since he was quite certain they would've never made it to the final act. Even now, it was all he could do to maintain control as she began to stroke him, her smooth, wet hand sliding up and down, up and down...

"God, Lily," he gasped out, burying his face in her hair. "Stop."

She pulled her hand away, looking up at him with a frown. "Not good?"

"No, *too* good. I want..." Pulling her close again, he slipped a hand between her thighs, making her shudder as he penetrated her with his fingers. "Need to be inside you."

"What are you waiting for?"

He groaned, so loudly that he somehow recalled the need for discretion, kneeling down to retrieve the wand from his discarded robes.

"Muffliato."

Oh yes, he needed to be inside her, convinced he might die if it didn't happen soon. And yet he couldn't help taking advantage of his current position, gazing up at her for a long



moment before leaning forward to press his lips against her thigh. Slowly, he worked his way up, first one and then the other, delighting in her sharp intake of breath as he brought his mouth to the juncture between them.

“Severus!” She leaned back ever so slightly, bracing herself against the counter behind her. “Shit...”

He’d never done this before. Had never had a reason to, really. But he’d always been a quick learner, and besides, he already had some idea as to how she liked to be touched. Back and forth, not side to side, firm yet gentle... no more difficult to do with his tongue than it was with his fingers, though admittedly, he liked this even better. The taste of her was exquisite, her heady fragrance arousing him beyond belief as she pressed herself against his mouth. Higher and higher, quiet pants giving way to a thrilling succession of loud, shuddering moans, and he knew she was on the brink. Just a little more now...

“Severus,” she whimpered, fists clenching in his hair as she lost control. And then he couldn’t take it anymore, rising to his feet and lifting her onto the counter, burying himself inside her in one smooth motion. She didn’t even have time to recover... head thrown back, eyes tightly closed, moaning softly as she lifted her legs to give him better access.

“Lily,” he heard himself mutter, his hips beginning to move. Slow at first, but not for long. Before he knew it, he was driving into her like a man possessed, his own eyes squeezing shut as he lost himself in her warmth, her softness, hunching over to press his lips against hers in one last, brutal kiss as his hips jerked forward once, twice, a third time, leaving him gasping against her mouth as his world exploded.

He came back to reality to find himself wrapped in her embrace, soothed by her steady heartbeat as she stroked his hair with gentle fingers. And suddenly, he knew that now was the time to say it, to give voice to all the feelings he’d held inside for what seemed like a lifetime. He needed to tell her how beautiful she was, how much he loved her, that she was quite literally the best thing that had ever happened to him. That he’d kill for her, die for her...

But for some reason, it was a struggle to keep his thoughts straight, let alone put them into words. He felt his eyes growing heavy, and when he opened his mouth, all that emerged was a huge yawn.

“Poor Severus. You’re exhausted.”

He shook his head, mumbling something that sounded vaguely like, “I’m all right.”

“You need a nap. We both do. Can you make it to the bedroom?”

“Of course,” he said, giving himself a shake as he reached down to pull up his trousers.

All the same, he didn’t protest as she slipped an arm around his waist, leaning heavily against her for support as she opened the door and guided them into the hall. Soon enough, he was stretched out beneath the blankets, her warm body pressed against his as she lifted her wand and dropped the heavy draperies over the windows, casting the room into shadow.

“Lily?” he whispered.

“Hmmm?”

“What you said before... I wanted to tell you...” He sucked in a deep breath, struggling to keep his eyes open. “Wanted you to know that...”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to say it.”

“But I want to... wanted you to know that I love you, too. Always have.”

“I know, Severus.”

“Always will.”

And with that, he let out a sigh of relief, his lips brushing against hers one last time as he surrendered to the darkness.

## 45. Precautions

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### Chapter 45: Precautions

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“Lumos,” Lily whispered, stifling a yawn as she glanced over at Severus. He was still deeply asleep, harsh features softened by a peaceful expression that made him look years younger, reminding her of the boy she’d once known. Smiling to herself, she smoothed his hair back, kissing him on the forehead before slipping out of bed.

Shivering in the brisk autumn air, she searched for her nightgown, wanting nothing more than to crawl back beneath the warm blankets. Unfortunately, her practical needs could no longer be ignored — ravenous hunger, not to mention a desperate need to visit the loo.

Poor Severus... he had to be as famished as she was. Should she wake him?

Stepping closer to the bed, she studied his chest, reaching out to trace a prominent rib with the tip of her finger. He’d always been thin, of course, but these days, his body was all muscle, bone, and sinew, his stomach so flat it was almost concave. Did he even bother to eat when she wasn’t around? Or, as she was beginning to suspect, did he skip most meals in favor of the strong black coffee he loved?

“Severus?” she murmured, touching his cheek with gentle fingers.

He turned his face in her direction, letting out a soft sigh. But his eyes remained closed, underscored by dark circles that hadn’t faded, even though he’d slept most of the day and well into the evening. Upon closer inspection, she could see faint lines of weariness etched into his skin, reminding her that he wasn’t a boy at all, but a man who lived under an enormous amount of pressure. Up before dawn, rarely getting to bed until after midnight, and even then, his slumber was often fitful. She couldn’t recall the last time she’d seen him sleep so soundly, hadn’t realized how badly he’d needed it until now.

Pulling the blankets up over his chest, she cast a warming charm before quietly leaving the room.

“Charity?” she called, keeping her voice low as she emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later.

Frowning at the lack of response, she poked her head in and out of various rooms, torn between confusion and worry. The only way out of the headmaster’s quarters was through the main door, which Charity couldn’t have opened on her own. Granted, she could’ve switched to a different animal, one that was small enough to pass through nooks and crannies. But there was no sign of the cat either, who would’ve naturally been left behind if that were the case.

“Charity? Where are you?”

Finally, she gave up and padded into the study, deciding there had to be a logical explanation. Something obvious, no doubt, which would come to her when she wasn’t faint

with hunger, unable to focus on anything aside from the meager assortment of food laid out on the table. Dropping into a chair, she inspected the leftover sandwiches, only to remember that she'd used them to feed the cat that morning. No meat, no cheese... nothing except wilted lettuce and stale, sodden bread. Ugh! She wasn't *that* desperate. Not yet.

The only other food was a handful of lemon biscuits, which would have to be enough until Severus woke up. She hated the thought of disturbing him, especially over something as trivial as fetching dinner.

Besides, it was nice to have a little time alone, a chance to reflect on what had happened earlier. It still seemed like a dream, her senses reeling as he'd made love to her beneath the morning sunlight. That first time had shattered all her expectations, his eyes burning with a thousand emotions as he'd eased himself inside her, hesitating with an expression of wonder before he'd started to move.

She hadn't thought it could get any better... not until he'd interrupted her bath to take her a second time, his urgency almost palpable as his hands slid across her slick, wet skin. Pleasuring her with his mouth... an onslaught of sensation unlike anything she'd ever known, leaving her breathless and trembling as he'd lifted her onto the counter. Lying there sated in the aftermath, watching him through hazy eyes as he'd taken his own pleasure, delicious aftershocks rippling through her body with each of his pounding thrusts. Swift, almost frantic... his lips swooping down to capture hers in a brutal kiss, a harsh whisper of "Lily" breathed into her mouth as she'd felt the warmth of his release deep inside her. It had been...

"Shit," she sputtered, nearly choking on a mouthful of biscuit.

It had been *amazing*. Yes. Intense beyond belief. Emotion and sensation and pure, raw need... so overwhelming that practical matters hadn't even entered her mind. Like the need to take precautions, for example, or what the consequences might be if they didn't.

Rising to her feet, Lily paced the room, one hand resting absently on her stomach. Pregnant? That was difficult to imagine, having spent most of her adult life incapable of conceiving a child. And yet her body's reaction was instantaneous, a shiver of longing finding its center in her empty womb as she began to recall memories from what seemed like another lifetime. Her belly round and firm, every tiny movement filling her with excitement as her baby shifted inside her. Emotions in turmoil... bewilderment, joy, heady anticipation, overlaid by fear in those last few weeks of pregnancy. Catching James staring at her massive stomach in dismay, realizing their thoughts were the same. How was she supposed to manage something that seemed physically impossible? What if the baby died in the attempt, or she did? Uncommon, yes, but not unheard of, even in the magical community.

And then one night, she'd awoken to a terrible cramping sensation in her lower belly, stifling her moans as James had snored beside her. She hadn't known it was possible to feel so miserable, her swollen body already drenched with sweat in the stifling summer heat. Alone in the darkness, she'd suffered through several contractions, weeping into the pillows as she'd realized it was only going to get worse.

Why had she decided to have her baby at home? More than that, why had she insisted on doing it naturally, without Muggle or even magical assistance? Something about it not being safe to venture out with a newborn in the middle of a war, along with some other nonsense

about wanting to be fully present during labor, convinced that she'd be able to handle the pain. Women had been doing it for centuries, after all.

Yes, her reasoning had made sense when giving birth was only an abstract concept. Facing the reality of those decisions? That was another matter entirely, but she'd known it was too late to change her mind. Granted, the pain had been excruciating, but the thought of everyone looking at her with eyes that said, "I told you so" if she begged for relief? Downright intolerable.

With that thought, she'd heaved herself out of bed, hobbling to the bathroom to dry her tears before returning with her jaw set and steely determination in her voice.

"Wake up, James. It's time."

Following that, all she remembered was pain... wave after wave of agony ripping through her as she'd struggled to push the child from her womb. Grunting and straining beyond human endurance before bearing down for one last, desperate attempt, her exhausted sobs echoed by a furious wail as she'd collapsed against the pillows. Harry had been born in that moment, yet so had she, her life instantly transformed by the tiny bundle that had been placed in her arms. All those promises she'd made as he'd nuzzled her breast, tears streaming down her cheeks as she'd whispered vows of love and protection, swearing that she'd never, *ever* let him come to any harm, that she'd rather die than...

Lily shook her head, unable to remember the rest of the words she'd spoken. And yet she'd proven the truth of them... not just once, but twice now. First during those final stages of labor when she'd been convinced she was dying, logical thought obliterated by long hours of suffering. Weak, drained, but still mustering up the strength for another push... another and another, determined to deliver safely before what seemed like her imminent demise. Irrational? Perhaps, but it had been the only reality she'd known, a powerful instinct to preserve her child's life above all else. It was the same urge that had overtaken her when she'd faced Voldemort, shielding Harry with her body as sickly green light had illuminated the room.

Coming back to the present, Lily let out a shuddering sigh. Her hopes, her dreams, all her good intentions... nothing had turned out the way she'd planned. Granted, even during those giddy months of pregnancy, she'd understood the realities of war. That she might end up dying for her child rather than surviving to raise him? She'd accepted that as a possibility. And yet she'd never imagined a third option, a world in which she'd be forced to watch him grow up without her, helpless and silent, unable to shield him from the suffering he was destined to endure.

In many ways, she'd found it easier to cope with her feelings as an animal. Unable to speak or even cry, she'd had no choice but to swallow her pain, burying it deep inside with the reassurance that her circumstances were only temporary... that someday, when she was human again, she'd set things right. She'd give Harry a home, a family, would finally have the chance to be the mother he'd always deserved.

*When I'm human again...*

She'd never realized how desperately she'd clung to those words, how much they'd sustained her over the years. And the worst part was that deep down, she'd been lying to

herself all along. Simply being human again wouldn't fix things, could never make up for all those years she'd lost. Harry was grown up now, had built a family for himself without her. He didn't need a mother... she couldn't be sure he'd even *want* one at this late stage. How would he adjust to her presence in his life when the idealized version of Lily was already cemented in his mind? Old photographs and rose tinted memories, heroic tales of a mother who'd died to protect her infant son. Those around Harry had taught him to put her on a pedestal, leading him to believe she'd been perfection incarnate. How could she, with all her flaws and shortcomings, hope to measure up to that?

She tried to tell herself it would be okay, that he'd accept her no matter what. But when she thought about the lies he'd been told, how violently he'd reacted to anything that contradicted them, she couldn't be sure. After all, the mere suggestion that James had been arrogant (which was true) had left him screaming in outrage, desperate to defend his father's memory. Obviously, he preferred to remember them both as heroes, with a love story that could have been plucked from the pages of a fairytale. Being forced to shatter those illusions would be bad enough. But the reason those illusions existed in the first place... proof that people he'd trusted had been deceiving him all along? She hated to imagine how much that would hurt him.

Lily sighed, settling back into her chair. No, it wasn't going to be easy, but he deserved to know the truth. She'd believed that all along, promising herself she'd tell him everything as soon as her humanity was restored. And yet now that the time had finally come, he wasn't even around to hear it.

That was the most difficult part of all, far more distressing than the thought of his anger or even his hatred. Not knowing where he was, when he'd return, or worst of all, if she'd ever see him again. How could she worry about how he'd react to her presence when revealing herself to him wasn't even an option? This was the reality that haunted her, the realization that her humanity changed nothing. He was out there somewhere, in hiding or perhaps even in danger... and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

As it was, she couldn't even bring herself to *talk* about her fears. Harry was still a touchy subject, and besides, Severus had his own limitations to deal with. Why burden him with her feelings of helplessness, when in many ways, they had to mirror his own? After all, they were *both* trapped at Hogwarts, prime targets to one side or the other if they dared to show their face in public. Why remind him of that fact? It seemed unnecessary, even cruel.

Glancing down, she studied the hand that still rested on her abdomen. It felt so flat, empty... and yet the alternative was out of the question. She'd already had one child in the middle of a war, an experience that had ended in separation followed by an unspeakable amount of pain. To do it again, under circumstances that were even less suitable? The thought of being pregnant while trapped in these rooms, not to mention giving birth here... Severus would help her, of course, but what if there were complications? It wasn't like she could be rushed to St. Mungo's or the Hospital Wing. Worse, what if he wasn't even around when she went into labor? Off at a Death Eater meeting, perhaps, or in another part of the castle where she had no hope of reaching him?

At that thought, she pictured herself lying naked in the bed they shared, just as she had that morning. Only this time, she wasn't moaning in pleasure, legs spread wide to welcome her lover. She was whimpering in anguish, knees held apart for another reason entirely as

powerful contractions wracked her body. Again and again she cried out, but there was no comforting voice to murmur encouragements, no soothing hand to smooth tendrils of hair away from her sweat soaked face. Delirious with pain, she called for a sip of water, only to be struck all over again by the awful reality of her situation when her request was met by silence. Alone. Terrified. Hoping like hell Severus would return before it was too late, resisting the urge to push until she had no other choice...

Lily shuddered, cursing herself for her vivid imagination.

And yet giving birth was only the beginning of her concerns. Nine months of pregnancy... what would that do to Severus? He'd worry incessantly, squandering precious time and energy on his efforts to take care of her. She couldn't fool herself into believing he'd be like James, who'd slept through her nightly bouts of "morning" sickness, had responded to her mood swings with a shrug or a teasing remark. Severus would take it all to heart, fretting constantly over her condition, perhaps even blaming himself for her discomfort. And even if she delivered the baby without incident, what about the aftermath? All those sleepless nights, when he already lived in a state of constant exhaustion? Another person depending on him, more fragile and helpless than all the others? Granted, Severus was strong... so strong it was hard to believe he had a breaking point. But deep down, she knew he did, and that was something she never wanted to see. He had way too much stress to deal with already... no sense in increasing the pressure.

Besides, did he even *want* children? That was the most important question of all, though she couldn't bring herself to ask it just yet. Better to save that conversation for later, preferably when they *weren't* in the middle of a war. After she'd revealed herself to Harry, had hopefully established a relationship with him. Then she could see if the issues between him and Severus could be resolved, after which would be the time to start thinking about the future. Marriage, home, a family... the second chance she desperately wanted, yet was afraid to even hope for. Would Severus want those things, too? What if he didn't?

Well, she'd just have to deal with that when the time came. In the meantime, it seemed best to focus on the here and now, figuring out how to make the best of their current circumstances. Making sure she *didn't* get pregnant would be a good start, though at this point, that was easier said than done.

A contraceptive charm would've been the simplest solution, but charms only worked when cast *before* sex. After the fact? Only a potion would work for her now, and even then, she'd need to take it within 24 hours. How long did she have? Their first encounter had happened early that morning, and... what time was it anyway? Glancing up at the clock, she cursed under her breath. Close to midnight? Not good, especially since it would take two hours just to brew the stuff.

Of course, Severus kept what amounted to a mini apothecary in the bathroom cabinet, but she knew better than to check there. If she'd wanted a Blood Replenisher, sure. Dreamless Sleep? He could've kept her supplied for months. Pain relievers or antidotes? No problem. But she'd never caught so much as a glimpse of a distinctive pink shimmer in that cabinet.

No, her only option was to wake him up, which was the last thing she wanted to do. Not only did she want him to get as much rest as possible, but having to explain what she needed? Just the thought of it made her cheeks turn red... then redder still when she realized how

foolish she was being. She was a grown woman now, not some fumbling teenager. And yet she hadn't had a sexual relationship in nearly two decades, not to mention that this one was brand new. Maybe she just needed time to adjust.

Unfortunately, *time* was a luxury she didn't have.

Of course, she could always take her chances. It had only happened twice, after all, and she'd already promised herself she'd be more careful in the future. But when she touched her wand to her abdomen, murmuring a barely remembered spell, she knew it was a risk she couldn't afford to take. Ovulating? Bloody fantastic. Another hour, maybe two, and then she'd have no choice but to...

"Lily?"

She jumped, knocking over a goblet of water. "Severus!"

He was standing in the doorway, fully dressed right down to his boots. There were pillow creases still embedded in his cheek, making it clear that he'd just woken up, though his eyes were sharp and alert.

"Forgive me," he said, his voice sounding strained. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"You didn't," she said, casting a quick drying charm. "Well, you did, but I don't mind. I was actually going to..."

Trailing off, she realized he was clutching his forearm, a cold knot forming in her stomach as she noticed the tension in his jaw. Oh no... not now...

"He's summoning me. I have to go."

"All right," she responded quietly. What else could she say?

She expected him to leave right away, hardly able to imagine his discomfort as the Mark continued to burn. But instead, he lingered in the doorway, opening his mouth and then closing it again with a slight shake of his head. And then suddenly, she knew what to do. Rising from her chair, she crossed the room, wrapping her arms around his neck and touching her lips to his throat, his jaw, feeling him relax against her before he tilted her chin up, his mouth covering hers. One long, lingering kiss followed by another... wondering why his arms were trembling before she realized he was trying to force himself to let her go. Somehow, that both enthralled her and nearly broke her heart.

Taking a step back, she attempted a reassuring smile, reaching out to touch his cheek. "Come back to me, Severus. Please."

"Always," he said, followed by a flash of something tortured in his eyes as he turned his head to kiss her palm.

With that, he disappeared, leaving only hollow silence in his wake.

"Fuck," Lily muttered, her anxiety threatening to give way to outright panic. There was little chance she'd be able to get her hands on that potion now, which seemed especially cruel in light of the temptation she was fighting so hard to ignore. So easy to take her chances... so much more difficult to figure out a solution. Maybe she should just...



She yelped, startled for a second time as something moved out of the corner of her eye. But then she recognized the cat, smiling as she reached down to stroke her glossy coat.

“Sorry, I don’t have any food for you.”

*No problem. I never realized it before, but this castle is positively teeming with mice. I know it sounds disgusting, but...*

Lily shook her head. “I was the same way. Mice when I was a cat, worms when I was a bird and so forth. It’s temporary though — you won’t want those things when you’re human again.”

*Good to know.*

“So where have you been?”

*Well, Charity thought back at her, giving her a mischievous look. Judging by the sounds that were coming from that bedroom, I figured the two of you needed some space.*

“Oh god, I’m sorry.” Unable to help herself, Lily blushed. “I didn’t even think...”

*Don’t apologize. I felt bad for invading your privacy, but with senses like these, sometimes I just can’t help it.*

“I remember. Rather miss it now and then, to tell you the truth.”

*Gives you a whole new perspective on people, doesn’t it? Not that I’ve ever been the type to eavesdrop, mind, but the things you hear just wandering around the castle... the things you see...*

Lily gave her a curious look. “Like what?”

*Well, there was...* Charity hesitated for a long moment, then rushed forward as if desperate to change the subject. *Oh, the Carrows! You wouldn’t believe...*

“Nasty little buggers,” Lily interrupted, wrinkling her nose.

*Nastier than you know. Would you believe I actually saw the two of them... right there on my old desk! That’s one piece of furniture that will be replaced if I ever get my job back, I assure you.*

Lily stared at her, horrified. “I thought they were brother and sister.”

*Oh, they are. Didn’t stop them from going at it like a couple of... well, nevermind. Pureblood supremacy at its finest, eh?*

Shuddering in disgust, Lily quickly changed the subject. “So how did you get out? You couldn’t have opened the door, surely.”

*Not the main door, no, but the others are easy enough.*

“Others? Are you saying...?”

*There’s one right next to you, there on the wall to your left. See that small silver button under the sconce? Push it.*

It took Lily a moment to spot the button, so small it reminded her of a Muggle thumbtack. It blended in with the decor almost perfectly, undetectable to anyone who wasn't actively looking for it. Extending her finger, she hesitated before giving it a gentle push.

The wall slid away, revealing a dark, narrow corridor.

"How did you find this?" she breathed, glancing back over her shoulder at Charity.

*Thought it might be a bug. Looks nothing like one, of course, but I had to take a closer look. One of those annoying things about being a cat.*

"Oh yes, I remember." Lily smiled. "But you said there were several? How did you find them?"

*Once I figured out what it was, it was easy to spot the others. Ducked inside a few to see where they'd take me, and then it all made sense. Everyone always said Dumbledore knew everything that went on around Hogwarts. Probably wanted us all to think he was omniscient or something, but...*

"Eavesdropping. Secret passageways. Of course!"

The cat bobbed her head, looking pleased with herself.

"So where do they go?"

*This one here branches off in several places, though the main part heads straight to the kitchens. Haven't checked the bedroom yet, but there's one in the hallway that leads to the dungeons, and another in the bathroom that's directly connected to the Hospital Wing. The smaller passages mostly lead to classrooms, though the one next to the front door has two main passages. One takes you to the Great Hall, while the other appears to be a dead end.*

"You spent all day exploring them?" Lily stared at her, fascinated.

Yes.

"And no one could see you?"

No.

"But you were able to see them?"

*Hear them, mostly, but there are cracks here and there for you to peek through.*

"Can you get out?"

*Yes, though only when you reach the end.*

"What if someone sees you?"

*Not likely. The openings are all carefully hidden, you see. Take the one that leads to the library — one of the smaller passages if you go through the bathroom. You come to one of those little buttons on the other end, and when you push it, it opens behind a bookcase. No one can see you, especially since it's in the back corner of the Restricted Section. The one that takes you to the Great Hall opens into an alcove, hidden by a tapestry...*

"You were able to reach the buttons?" Lily interrupted, her lips twitching.

*Only just, though I expect it'll be easier for you.*

Giving her a look of mock horror, Lily said, "Surely you're not suggesting..."

*Why not?*

"Nobody's supposed to know I'm alive, much less that I'm hiding out at Hogwarts."

*So don't let anyone see you.*

"Severus would kill me."

*Then don't tell him. You're a grown woman, aren't you? I'm sure you're capable of making your own decisions. Besides, what's wrong with escaping once in a while? It has to be maddening being cooped up here all the time.*

That was something Lily tried not to think about, and yet she knew Charity was right. Being shut away drove her crazy sometimes, for all that she understood the necessity. It was the separation that got to her most, not having a clue what was going on in the rest of the school, let alone the outside world. She hated having to rely on Severus for her every need, from the food she ate to the products she used for personal care. Even that damn potion, which she could've taken care of herself if she could've only...

"The one in the bathroom?" she squeaked, her eyes going wide.

*Hospital Wing?*

"Do you think Madam Pomfrey would have...?" But she was out the door before she could finish the question, hurrying to the bedroom to wrap herself in one of Severus's cloaks. And then she paused, looking down at the cat in alarm. "What if he comes back?"

*Where did he go?*

"Death Eater meeting," she said softly.

*He's not even on the grounds? Should be simple enough. He didn't Apparate from the Headmaster's office, did he?*

Lily shook her head. "He doesn't do that... at least, not when he uses the Mark. I don't know if that's because it isn't possible, or if that's just what he wants Dumbledore and You-Know-Who to believe. Either way, he goes down to the Apparition point."

*Well, that gives us plenty of time. I'll keep watch for him at the front entrance, and if I see him coming, I'll find you. Just let me know where you'll be.*

"But what if I can't get back before he does?"

*Those passageways are a direct shot — doesn't take long to get to wherever you need to go. No moving staircases, no meandering routes. You'll run straight back, while Severus will have several flights of stairs to contend with. Besides, if he's coming back from a Death Eater meeting, he's not getting through that office without that portrait asking him a dozen questions.*

"Portrait?" Lily frowned.

*Yes, Dumbledore's portrait. Didn't you know?*

“Severus hasn’t said anything. Do they talk a lot?”

The cat hesitated. *You could say that.*

“That’s not good. I don’t even want to imagine what... well, we can talk about that later.” She knelt down to pull on her slippers, which would be soft and silent on the stone floors. “All right then. I’m just going to nip down to the Hospital Wing. If he still isn’t back when I’m done, I might try for the kitchens. You’re *sure* both of those are safe?”

*Kitchens will bring you out into a storage pantry. The opening is hidden by a bunch of old crates, though there’s food in there as well. Hospital Wing’s passage opens into a linen closet. That one’s a bit more dodgy, but at this time of night, you should be able to slip in and out without being seen. What are you after?*

“Potion.”

*Thought so. Well, the potions cabinet is only a few steps away, so it shouldn’t be too difficult. Just make sure Poppy is in her office, or at least at the other end of the room. She won’t be able to see through all the bed curtains, and the woman treads like an elephant, bless her. You’ll hear her coming from a mile away.*

“Right,” Lily said, attempting to disguise the tremor in her voice. “Well, I guess I’m off then.”

She pushed the tiny button, then paused to glance back over her shoulder. “Charity?”

*Hmmm?*

“Strange time to ask, I know, but did you attend Hogwarts? As a student, I mean.”

Yes.

“Which House?”

*Gryffindor.*

“Why am I not surprised?” she said, chuckling to herself as she slipped into the darkened passageway.

## 46. Illusions and Delusions

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### Chapter 46: Illusions and Delusions

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Severus hovered outside the gates of Malfoy Manor, struggling to find the focus he needed. Unfortunately, that task was proving far more difficult than usual, his entire consciousness dominated by the woman who waited for him back at Hogwarts.

Lily... naked in the morning sunlight, her skin pale as pearls, velvety soft beneath his touch. Lily's hands on his shoulders, graceful legs wrapped around his waist as he'd entered her ever so slowly, hardly able to believe his good fortune. Lily's voice, setting his senses aflame with every delicious moan, making him shiver right down to his toes. Those exquisite breasts pressed flush against his chest, sweet lips parting beneath his own...

Stubbornly, he pushed the erotic images away, cursing his body's reaction. Of course, he had every intention of dwelling on them at length in the days to come, but this certainly wasn't the time. Not when everything hinged on his ability to discipline his mind, to strengthen his shields until not so much as a single errant thought could escape.

How was he supposed to do that? Granted, he was a gifted Occlumens, but he'd never encountered a challenge quite like this one. There'd always been a sense of order to his inner musings, a logical structure that could simply be shuffled around when the need arose. But now? This was something new, a whirling tempest of vivid imagery and untempered emotion that defied all efforts to bring it under control.

Was it love? Perhaps, though that word seemed insufficient somehow. He'd loved Lily for most of his life, after all, yet had always been able to confine those feelings to some dark corner of his mind. Secretive by necessity, restrained by the knowledge that acting on his feelings was a luxury he didn't have. Indeed, why *wouldn't* he have kept his emotions concealed, when there'd been nothing to be gained from revealing them?

That, he realized, was the difference. Lily's confession had shattered his careful restraint, as if he'd been a gently simmering potion that had exploded upon the addition of the wrong ingredient. Or the *right* one in this case, though the end result was the same. Chaos was chaos, after all, a state of upheaval that couldn't be reversed. Of course, he wouldn't have wanted to go back to the way things were before, even if he'd had a choice in the matter. But that didn't mean he knew how to deal with what he was facing now, this brand new version of reality that still felt like a dream.

How was he supposed to face the Dark Lord in such a state? How could he put Lily from his mind when he could still feel her kisses on his lips, still detect the faint fragrance of lavender and sunshine that clung to the folds of his cloak? How, when he couldn't stop himself from wondering what it was that made her smell so good, as clean and fresh as a summer's day, even though she hadn't been outside in weeks? Or why she always...

“Fuck,” he muttered, shooting a wary glance at the manor in the distance. He was swiftly running out of time, yet no closer to controlling his thoughts than he’d been when he’d held her in his arms. Warm and sweet, her steady heartbeat vibrating against his chest as her soft breath had tickled his neck...

Desperately, he cast about for a solution, before a memory tickled at the edge of his consciousness. Something he’d read once in his Occlumency studies, something about practitioners fooling themselves into believing in an alternate reality? Yes... it was a tactic that wasn’t to be used lightly, the book had said, followed by cautionary tales of witches and wizards who’d abused the practice, permanently losing touch with their true identities. Fortunately, the book had also mentioned that this outcome was far more likely for amateurs, while a skilled Occlumens could employ the tactic to great effect.

As was often the case with Occlumency, there hadn’t been any specific instructions. Severus remembered that much, knowing this was one of those situations where instinct alone would determine success or failure. And success it would have to be... failure simply wasn’t an option.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, gathering up all the crucial memories he needed to forget. The cat’s appearance in his life, the realization that Lily had survived and everything that followed... he sealed one tiny imprint of each of these memories behind his shields, then set about the business of transforming the rest. Painful beyond description, his only joy replaced by bitter loneliness as he wove an intricate picture of what his life would’ve been like without her.

Soon enough, that harsh picture was the only reality he knew, her presence reduced to some distant dream in the back of his mind. No more than a fantasy... the *real* Lily was gone, dead, leaving him with nothing to live for aside from his vow to give her son a fighting chance. A promise that would ultimately lead to his death, but why should that matter? It was difficult to feel much grief over the thought of his demise, knowing that the rest of the world would only see it as a cause for celebration.

In truth, he had no one, which shouldn’t have been such a jarring realization. Hadn’t he known it all along? Why had he sat in his office just a few days before, deeply saddened by the thought that his days were numbered? It hardly made sense now, when it was so clear what the outcome would be even if he managed to survive. Locked up in Azkaban for the rest of his life, no doubt, but even if he escaped that miserable fate, he’d still be doomed to an existence of loneliness and regret. Nothing to fight for. Nothing to live for...

Suddenly, another image flashed through his mind, far more vivid than the vague fantasies that had haunted him before. Lily... her face ghastly pale, eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. He heard an infant’s cry, soon drowned out by his own tortured howls as he’d clutched her lifeless body to his chest. And then he remembered the awful days that had followed, sitting alone in the darkness at Spinner’s End, determined to drink himself into an early grave just as his father had done. But then Dumbledore had offered him a glimpse of hope. Granted, that hope was tinged with bitterness now that he knew the boy was destined to die, yet it had still been enough to sustain him all these years. Hope for redemption. Hope for revenge. Hope that in the end, he’d find a way to forgive himself.

Above all else... hope that he'd leave this world with the knowledge that Lily's death hadn't been in vain.

With that thought, Severus opened the gate and strode across the grounds, his defenses so strong that not even the Dark Lord himself could ever hope to penetrate them.

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Cautious and silent, Lily crept along the passageway, holding her wand aloft. The tip of it glowed, though only faintly... she was afraid to cast a stronger spell in case it was spotted by someone passing on the other side. Of course, the hallways were more or less deserted at this time of night, but there was no sense in taking unnecessary risks. The fact that she was here, about to attempt something that could easily end in disaster? That was risky enough.

Still, she couldn't deny her excitement, the feeling of exhilaration that came with her newfound freedom. As much as she loved the quarters she shared with Severus, she hadn't realized how trapped she'd felt until she'd been offered a way out. Even better, she loved having the opportunity to see to her own needs for once, rather than relying on Severus to take care of everything.

Not that she didn't appreciate his efforts. She just liked being able to do things for herself, which was a luxury she hadn't been able to enjoy for most of her adult life. It had been nearly two decades since she'd been to the market or cooked a meal, brewed a potion or purchased new clothes for herself. And even though she'd gotten used to being human again, she'd barely scratched the surface of what that meant. To think that one day, she'd be able to get a job, find a home, get married, start a family...

Of course, that last option was the one she was currently trying to prevent. But at least she had the option of seeking a solution for herself, rather than waiting helplessly for Severus to provide one. Not much in the grand scheme of things, but it was a start.

There wasn't much to see inside the passageway, which had nothing to do with the lack of proper lighting. Only drab gray walls and a stone floor, worn so smooth that she wondered how many other feet had tread this path. Smaller passageways branched out on either side, and as Charity had mentioned, there were cracks along the way that would've been perfect if she'd wanted to do a bit of spying.

Finally, she reached the end, spotting the tiny silver button as it glinted beneath the light of her wand.

"Nox," she whispered, holding her breath as she extended one finger.

Silently, the wall slid away, leaving her squinting in the dim light as she stepped forward, nearly tripping over a pile of blankets. She was in a linen closet, just as Charity had predicted, though it was a good deal larger than she might've expected. About the size of a small bedroom, with plenty of places to hide if someone happened to open the door.

Well, that was reassuring, though being safe in here was hardly the issue. She needed to reach the Potions cabinet, hopefully without getting caught in the process.

And then she saw it — a tiny peephole in the door. Briefly, she wondered why Charity hadn't mentioned it, before realizing it would've been much too high for her to reach. Even

Lily had to stand on her tiptoes, one eye squeezed shut as the other swept across the Hospital Wing.

At first, she thought it was deserted, until she caught a flicker of movement on the other side of the room. A shadow moved against the curtain, and then Madame Pomfrey emerged, followed by a familiar figure clad in a tartan dressing gown.

"I told you, Minerva, they're doing much better. They should be fine by morning."

"I'm relieved to hear that, but that's hardly the point. It shouldn't have happened in the first place!"

"You know I agree with you, but what can we do? Have you spoken with Severus?"

Minerva let out a huff. "He's not even here, the coward. I got a note from him this morning saying he was taking the weekend off, and then Hagrid told me he saw him leaving the grounds about an hour ago."

"Well, what about the Carrows? They're the ones who did this, aren't they? Have you talked to them?"

"No, they've disappeared, too. Probably off with You-Know-Who, gloating about the children they tortured."

*Tortured?* Lily frowned, straining to hear the rest.

"Unforgivables used at Hogwarts... and on students, no less! I'll tell you, Poppy, I never thought I'd see the day."

"I know, but you mustn't..."

The voices faded, followed by the soft click of a door as the women shut themselves up in Madame Pomfrey's office. Belatedly, Lily remembered why she was there in the first place, an errand that had nothing to do with spying or even the realization that the current situation at Hogwarts was far worse than she'd been led to believe. After all, she'd have plenty of time to think about that later.

For now, she needed to act quickly, though she hesitated long enough to cast a Disillusionment Charm, followed by a *Muffliato*. And then she ducked her head out, searching for the cabinet on the wall. As Charity had told her, it was only a few steps away, but she couldn't help feeling exposed as she inched toward it, hoping like hell it contained the potion she needed. Oh yes... there it was, a distinctive pink shimmer, clearly visible through the glass door.

She tugged on the handle, scowling when it refused to budge.

"*Alohomora*," she whispered.

Nothing happened, which came as no surprise. Obviously, there would've been no point in locking the damn thing if it had been that easy to open.

As such, she didn't expect the second spell to work, even though it was rarely used these days.

"*Portaberto?*"



There was a small pop, leaving her staring at a smoking hole where the key should've gone. Shit! So much for slipping in and out without anyone knowing she'd been there. Hastily, she pulled the door open, grabbing the potion and stuffing it in the pocket of her cloak before rushing back to the linen closet. She heard the sound of footsteps, fumbling frantically for the button, practically hurling herself into the passageway as Madam Pomfrey's voice exclaimed, "Someone's broken into my cabinet!"

"What did they take?" Minerva responded.

"I can't tell. Let me see... everything appears to be here, except my Contraceptive Potion. Why would anyone...?"

And then the door to the passageway slid shut, enveloping Lily in silence. She breathed a sigh of relief, wasting no time in uncorking the vial and taking a large swig before tucking it back in her pocket. Hurrying along the narrow corridor, she didn't stop until she was safely back in the Headmaster's quarters, staring into the bathroom mirror with a triumphant grin.

It might've ended there... if she hadn't realized how famished she was.

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"Ah, Severus. I'm pleased that you've finally decided to grace us with your presence."

Voldemort was sitting at the head of the table, lips curved in some macabre facsimile of a smile. Severus dipped his head in a respectful bow before letting his eyes sweep across the other faces. The Black sisters were present — Bellatrix practically frothing at the mouth as she gazed adoringly at her master, while Narcissa slumped in her chair, eyes fixed on her lap. Lucius sat beside her, wearing a vacant expression. Severus frowned, surprised to see that the Carrows had also been summoned. Wouldn't the Dark Lord have wanted someone to remain behind to watch over the school?

"Apologies, my lord," he said smoothly, regaining his composure. "I was right in the middle of dealing with a... situation when I received your summons. I came as quickly as I could."

"A situation, you say?" Voldemort gave him an inscrutable look. "Approach me."

Severus swallowed hard as he obeyed, bracing himself for the invasion to come.

*"Legilimens."*

Immediately, he thrust a single memory to the forefront, offering up a vivid picture of Gryffindor's sword. Weapon clutched tightly in the hands of children, then resting firmly in his own, he painted a scene that was far more harsh than what had actually occurred. No detentions with Hagrid, but a poisonous rant containing the most dire threats, followed by a flick of his wand, a painful scream...

Abruptly, the Dark Lord withdrew.

"You fool," he said, his voice deceptively soft, and then it was his hand that was holding a wand, pointed directly at Severus. "First, why was I not informed that you were in possession of such a valuable weapon? Why was it left in such a vulnerable location, unguarded to the point where three idiot children..." He trailed off, red eyes narrowing to dangerous slits

before he continued. “And then to mete out such a mild punishment, as if a couple of hexes will be enough to deter them from trying again?”

“My lord, please. Allow me to explain.”

“Very well.”

“Until this incident occurred, I wasn’t even aware that the sword was in my office. It seems that Dumbledore,” he paused, sneering at the name for added effect, “placed an enchantment upon it, one that could only be removed by a Gryffindor. How or when the children were notified of this, I don’t know, but...”

“That still doesn’t explain why your punishments weren’t more severe.”

“My lord, I received your summons only moments after I confiscated the sword. Admittedly, I didn’t address the situation with the gravity it deserved, but I was acting in haste. I wanted to report to you as soon as possible, assuming that the remainder of my punishments could wait for my return.”

“And where is the sword now?”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Severus withdrew a long, slender object from the folds of his cloak and laid it on the table. “I thought the best course of action would be to bring it directly to you.”

Voldemort leaned forward to inspect the weapon more closely, eyes glittering with satisfaction as he ran the tip of his finger along the blade. “Your assumptions were correct, Severus,” he said softly. “Well done. Well done indeed. Please, feel free to sit.”

Severus did as he was told, ignoring Bellatrix’s resentful glare as he took the seat directly on Voldemort’s right. Patiently, he waited for the rest of the meeting to proceed, though that didn’t happen for quite some time. Voldemort was too busy admiring his newest trophy, finally lifting his head to fire a question at Lucius.

“Where’s the Muggle?”

“Avery left her upstairs, my lord.”

“Is she still alive?”

Lucius hesitated. “I believe so.”

“Good. Bring her to me.”

With a deferential nod, Lucius turned and left the room, returning a few minutes later dragging the captive by the hair. She was hardly more than a girl, a sweet faced thing with a riot of blonde curls. But there was little life left in her, lips parting in only the softest of whimpers as she was flung at the Dark Lord’s feet. Of course, she was naked, as they all were by the end, her bloodied body making it clear that she’d already endured a great deal of torture.

Swallowing the bile that rose in his throat, Severus resisted the urge to avert his eyes, forcing himself to maintain a stoic expression.

“How many have had her?” Voldemort asked, gazing down at the crumpled figure.

Lucius pondered this for a moment. “Avery, of course. Mulciber, Yaxley, Travers...”

“Wormtail?”

“Twice.”

“And yourself?”

Lucius shot a quick glance at Narcissa, then shook his head. “I have no taste for Muggles, my lord.”

“I see. Well, I’ve never had any objection to Muggles being used for carnal purposes, as long as they’re disposed of as soon as the deed is done. We wouldn’t want to run the risk of polluting our bloodlines any further now, would we?”

“No, my lord,” echoed a small chorus of voices.

Nodding in approval, he lifted the sword, pressing the tip of the blade to the girl’s throat. “And what about you, Muggle? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Her response was barely audible, a harsh, rasping sound that spoke of unimaginable suffering.

“Kill me. Please.”

Voldemort chuckled, lipless mouth curving into a smile. “Finally,” he said, “a Muggle with some common sense. Just for that...” Without warning, he jerked forward, burying the sword deep in her chest. It was a gruesome sight, made infinitely worse by her last, choking breaths as she writhed at the Dark Lord’s feet. But at least it was over quickly, which was far preferable to the prolonged torture that would’ve been the result of her begging for her life. Severus didn’t think he would’ve been able to tolerate that without turning away in revulsion... though of course, he’d had the same thought on numerous occasions, always managing to maintain his composure somehow.

Unfortunately, others weren’t so lucky.

“You don’t approve of my actions, Lucius?”

Lucius’s face had turned slightly green, his eyes fixed on the wall. At the sound of the Dark Lord’s voice, he jumped, his panicked expression struggling to reshape itself into a mask of indifference.

“Quite the contrary, my lord. It was a... fitting end.”

“Fitting,” Voldemort echoed, his voice thoughtful. “Indeed it was. And yet I saw you looking away, Lucius, almost as if you couldn’t bear to watch. Not out of some misguided sense of compassion, I hope? Such weakness could prove detrimental to our cause.”

“Compassion?” Lucius’s lip curled into a haughty sneer as he stared down at the girl’s broken body. “Hardly. I was only concerned about the carpet, my lord. It’s an heirloom, you see, and...”

“Ah, yes,” Voldemort seemed to relax, stroking the hilt of the sword with gentle fingers. “Well then, I suppose your lack of enthusiasm can be forgiven. Our relics are... precious. No one understands that better than I do.” He paused, setting the sword on the table before he

continued. "Fear not for your possessions, Lucius. There's no permanent damage, which you'll see for yourself as soon as you've cleaned up this mess."

Lucius stared at him, clearly horrified. "My lord?"

"Yes, go ahead and dispose of the body — the rest of us have important matters to discuss."

Severus watched Lucius take a deep breath in an obvious attempt to control his revulsion. And then he reached down to grab a fistful of hair, leaving a wide trail of blood in his wake as he dragged the girl from the room in the same manner he'd brought her in. The others didn't seem to notice the blood, save for Bellatrix, who stared down at it in wide-eyed fascination.

"Bellatrix?"

She snapped to attention, leaning forward to simper at her master. "Yes, my lord?"

"Take this sword and clean it off. Narcissa? Go with her."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Voldemort turned to address the Carrows.

"Now then, shall we revisit your earlier complaints?"

"Yes, my lord," Amycus said, shooting a quick glance at his sister. "Well, as we've already told you..."

"I know what you told me," Voldemort interrupted with a hint of impatience. "I'm asking you to repeat it for Severus's benefit. He's the one you're accusing of negligence, after all."

"We didn't mean..."

"We're not saying that Severus is neglecting his duties," Alecto said hastily, cutting her brother off. "In many ways, I'd say the opposite is true. Insists on handling everything himself, he does, won't let us do our jobs."

"Is he teaching your classes for you?"

Alecto looked confused. "No, my lord."

"Withholding your pay?"

"No, of course not."

"Well then, what's the issue?"

"My lord," Amycus said, looking right past Severus as if he wasn't even there. "He won't allow us to discipline our students. Always intervenes before we have the chance."

"Except for tonight," Alecto interjected. "Though that's only because he wasn't around at the time."

Severus frowned, though he managed to hold his tongue, knowing it was better if Voldemort was the one who asked for further details.

"So you used the *Cruciatus* on two students?" The Dark Lord seemed pleased by the idea, even before he asked, "What was their offense?"

“Overheard them talking about Harry Potter,” Amycus said. “Called the miserable brat a hero. Reason enough for punishment as we saw it, but wanted to interrogate them at the same time.”

“And did they know anything?”

“Afraid not, my lord.”

“I see. Nonetheless, you did the right thing. Wouldn’t you agree, Severus?”

“Yes, my lord,” Severus said, keeping his features blank. “Of course.”

“And would you say they should be trusted to make these judgment calls without your interference?”

He was trapped. He knew it, and yet he refused to give up, casting about frantically for an explanation that the Dark Lord might accept. Sucking in a deep breath, he said, “My lord, Alecto and Amycus are my most trusted employees. Truly, I don’t know what I’d do without their assistance. I’ve only chosen to interfere because I know these children... I’ve had years to learn their ways, while my companions here have only been working at Hogwarts for a matter of weeks. As such...”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Silence, Alecto. Severus? Continue.”

“Thank you, my lord. My point is that all of these children are different. Harsh tactics are certainly effective with some, but others would be better served with a more gentle approach. I’ve come to understand these differences, which is why...”

Voldemort held up a hand, effectively cutting him off. “Why show mercy to some and not to others? Any child who rebels against my regime deserves to be punished with the utmost severity.”

Severus nodded. “I’d agree with that sentiment, at least at face value. But not all of these children are truly rebellious. Some merely act out because they’ve been pressured by their friends to do so. Others have lived so long under Dumbledore’s tyranny that they rebel out of habit, not realizing there’s another option. To speak out against him, to choose another way? In the past, such behavior would’ve had dire repercussions.”

“Indeed. Go on.”

“I’m not suggesting that all students deserve our clemency. Far from it. But in cases where a touch of restraint might result in another loyal supporter for our cause? I’m sure you can see the wisdom in that.”

Amycus sniffed. “One spoiled brat is no different than another. Why should we...”

“Spoiled brats?” Voldemort shot him a scathing look. “Fully grown wizards and witches in just a few short years. Some have already reached their majority. Are you suggesting that we ignore their potential?”

“Of course not, my lord, but...”

“Quiet,” he said, before returning his attention to Severus. He paused for a long moment, and then his lips twitched into a smile. “You are to be commended, Severus. Such vision and forethought is crucial to our cause.”

Severus bowed his head. “Thank you.”

“That said, I do have my concerns. Where these two might be too quick to choose brutality, I’m afraid the opposite is true for you. You claim your long years at Hogwarts have given you special insight into the students’ minds, but I fear they’ve also made you soft. Thus far, I’ve seen nothing from you beyond a hex or two and a handful of detentions. Are you even capable of more severe punishments?”

“I am, my lord.”

Voldemort nodded. “I hope so. Now more than ever, Hogwarts is in need of firm leadership. And while I’ll concede that mercy might be justified in a handful of cases, that should be the exception, not the rule.”

“My lord?”

“Yes, Alecto? Speak.”

“What about us? Are we to be given a free hand?”

“For minor infractions, yes. For major ones, you should continue to report to Severus, keeping in mind that he is your superior. He has the final word.”

Alecto and Amycus didn’t bother to hide their disappointment, though they were wise enough not to voice it aloud. Voldemort didn’t seem to notice, however, having already returned his attention to Severus.

“Do you have anything else to say?”

Severus shook his head, knowing this was the best outcome he could hope for. He still had some measure of power, the potential to intervene in the most serious situations. Of course, the Carrows would respond to even the mildest infractions with brutality, while Severus himself would have to be harsher with his own punishments. But at least he’d be able to spare a few students here and there without arousing the Dark Lord’s suspicions, helped by his continued efforts to cover for them whenever he could manage it.

“Alecto? Amycus?”

“No, my lord.”

“Very well then. The three of you may go.”

Severus left the room without a backward glance, eager to get back to Hogwarts.

## 47. Very Old Friends

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### Chapter 47: Very Old Friends

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Lily knew she was pushing her luck. She'd already had one close call when she'd visited the Hospital Wing, not to mention that Severus had been gone for quite a while now. What if he got back to their quarters before she did, despite Charity's attempts to warn her? He'd be frantic, to say the least, would probably spend hours searching the castle.

But none of these arguments changed the fact that she was starving. Aside from a couple of lemon biscuits, she hadn't eaten in more than 24 hours, and there was no telling if Severus would be in any condition to fetch food when he returned. He might be exhausted, distressed, or even injured. And then it would be too late.

Was she being selfish? Eating seemed like a trivial concern compared with the thought of him being hurt. But she couldn't go without food indefinitely, and besides, wouldn't she be in a better position to take care of him if she wasn't weak with hunger?

With that thought, the decision was made, a perfect excuse for another taste of freedom. Removing the vial from her pocket, she hurried to the bedroom, concealing it beneath a pile of nightgowns.

And then she made her way to the study, pressing the button and slipping behind the wall as if she'd been doing it for years. From there, her progress was quick and uneventful, a steady walk through the darkness until finally, she spotted a familiar silver object glinting beneath the light of her wand.

One firm push and the wall slid away, revealing a large pantry piled high with boxes and crates of foodstuffs. The first thing that caught her attention was a basket of shiny green apples — she pocketed three before spotting an assortment of meats and cheeses, prevented from spoiling with a Refrigeration Charm. There was bread, too, along with at least a dozen flavors of jam, and she even found a tub of ice cream, sitting on a long counter next to numerous jugs of pumpkin juice and a single case of butterbeer.

Grabbing an empty platter, she filled it with food before retreating into the darkest corner of the pantry, safely concealed behind a huge pile of tablecloths. And then she began to eat, moaning in pleasure as a hunk of soft cheese practically melted in her mouth. That was immediately followed by several slices of tender roast beef, bread smeared with strawberry jam... she'd never imagined food could taste so good, going back for seconds before she finally felt satisfied.

Only then did she realize she'd eaten too much, wishing she could lie down right there and take a nice, long nap. But of course, that wasn't possible, and so she heaved herself to her feet, hiding any evidence of her presence before slipping back into the passageway.

Lethargic from her overindulgence, she walked more leisurely on the way back, pleased that this latest excursion had gone off without a hitch. Maybe when Severus went back to work, she might try some of the other passages? It would be lovely to see more of the castle, to have a chance to stretch her legs instead of sitting around all day.

Catching a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye, she stopped dead in her tracks, lifting her wand to inspect the wall. And then she waited, counting off a dozen deep breaths as she did so.

Nothing happened.

She lowered her wand, chuckling softly as she continued on her way.

And then without warning, a large, distinctly human figure materialized in front of her, blocking her path.

Unable to help herself, she screamed.

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Severus let out a shuddering sigh, closing his eyes as the brisk autumn breeze caressed his face. He sucked it in with huge, gulping mouthfuls, the heady fragrance of wood smoke and dried leaves gradually overpowering the scent of blood, the taste of death.

Feeling more steady, he made his way across the grounds, eyes open now and fixed on the gate in the distance. Of course, the walk wasn't necessary — he could've Disapparated from directly inside the house. But he needed the exercise, finding comfort in the silence and the cool night air. It gave him a chance to collect his thoughts, to drop his defenses if only for a little while, before he was forced to play his part all over again. The evil headmaster... loved by none, despised by all. No doubt they'd hate him even more now, would never know that he'd done everything in his power to hold the Carrows in check.

"Severus?"

He spun on his heel, hand closing reflexively around his wand.

"Lucius," he said, dipping his head in a curt nod.

To say the other man looked terrible would've been an understatement. His pale green robes were soaked with blood, his stubbled face ashen beneath the moonlight. Lucius, who'd always taken such pride in being impeccably groomed, reeking of perspiration and body odor, underscored by the faint smell of vomit. It was... well, it was tragic, really.

Resisting the urge to wrinkle his nose, Severus waited patiently for him to speak.

"I was just... disposing of the body."

Severus frowned, noticing the dirt on the other man's hands. "You couldn't have used a spell?"

"No wand."

"Ah, of course." Clearly, this was another form of punishment, intended to humiliate Lucius while giving him plenty of time to think about his precarious situation. Severus could



almost imagine him burying that ravaged body, wondering if his own was destined to meet a similar fate.

"I didn't rape her," Lucius muttered under his breath.

"No," Severus said dryly. "I doubt Narcissa would've approved of that."

"It isn't just Narcissa. Even if... I wouldn't have."

"Well," Severus hesitated, knowing they were treading on dangerous ground. "As you said, you have no taste for Muggles."

Lucius looked up, meeting his eyes for the first time. "Neither do you, it seems."

"No. There are certain... *things* I find repulsive."

Of course, this had nothing to do with the victims being Muggles. But to acknowledge that out loud? That admission would come with a heavy price, one that neither was willing to pay.

"How's Draco?" Lucius said, abruptly changing the subject. "Is he doing well in his studies this year?"

Severus shrugged. "I haven't heard any complaints."

"Will you tell him... well, just let him know he's in our thoughts. Please."

"Of course. Anything else?"

Lucius hesitated, then shook his head. "No, thank you. Good night, Severus."

Severus nodded, feeling the other man's eyes on his back as he walked down to the gate and quietly let himself out. One quick turn followed by a blur of motion, and then he was standing outside a different gate, far more familiar than the one back at Malfoy Manor could ever be. Only then did he begin the painful process of lowering his defenses, stoicism replaced by bitter loneliness and despair. Lily gone, dead, beyond his reach forever...

But then gradually, like the sun creeping over the horizon, he began to remember. One by one, wisps of thought escaped from behind his barriers... not vague, hopeless fantasies as he'd forced himself to believe, but *memories*. Solid. Vivid. Real. Lily... she'd come back to him. A pretty little cat who'd become his constant companion, a moment of shock that had nearly brought him to his knees when he'd found her message scrawled across his kitchen table. Discovering the journal... devouring every word with hot tears pouring down his cheeks...

The Forbidden Forest... a huge, smoking cauldron... watching with bated breath as a woman with brilliant red hair had risen from the mist. How could he have forgotten? Her heart beating against his chest, as strong and steady as his own. Low, musical laughter ringing out in his quarters, the gentle smile that was always there to greet him at the end of the day. Falling asleep with her pressed against his side, waking early each morning just to watch her sleep. Weeping in her arms without a hint of shame, finding the forgiveness he'd never dared to hope for...

Suddenly, he was assaulted by a thousand images at once, slamming into him like a Stunner to the chest. Moans and gasps and bare, slick skin, his hips rocking against hers as he

drove deeper with every thrust. Lily clinging to him as if she'd never let him go, her body trembling with ecstasy. And then...

*I'm saying that I'm in love with you.*

She loved him. Despite everything, *she loved him*. Lily... who was in the Headmaster's quarters at this very moment, awaiting his return.

With that thought, Severus decided to take advantage of his newfound powers, convinced that he couldn't reach her fast enough. One graceful leap and he was soaring across the grounds, aiming straight for an open window on one of the upper floors. He landed smoothly, relieved to see that he was only a few steps away from the staircase that led to his office.

Taking the steps two at a time, he burst through the door, headed straight for the tapestry on the opposite wall.

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"Nick!" Lily gasped, her heart thudding frantically in her chest. The ghosts... why hadn't she thought about the bloody ghosts?

Oddly enough, Nick didn't seem the least bit perturbed by her presence. "Miss Evans. Lily."

"You remember me?" she blurted out, cursing herself as she attempted to backtrack. "No, I mean, I'm not... you must be mistaking me for someone else."

"I sincerely doubt that." He shrugged, his head teetering dangerously before he reached up to hold it steady. "More than five hundred years, and I'm pleased to say that I've never forgotten a face. Besides, there's no mistaking those eyes of yours. Inherited by your son, yes?"

Lily nodded, giving him a wary look.

"Good boy, Harry. You must be proud."

"I, ah... yes, I am. But you... why aren't you surprised to see me?"

"My apologies. Would you like me to act shocked?" He laid a hand on his chest, rolling his eyes as he pretended to swoon.

Despite herself, Lily chuckled. "No need for that. It just seems strange, that's all."

"Because everyone believes you're dead?"

She smiled. "Something like that."

"But you're not. You never were."

"Oh no, I *did* get killed. Sort of. It's difficult to explain. I lost my old body, and then I was... well, I was an animal. Not *technically* an animal, but... bloody hell, I must sound crazy."

*"Ligatis Animalia?"*

Lily stared at him, dumbfounded. "How do you know about that?"

“As mentioned,” Nick said, flashing her a charming smile. “I’ve been around for more than five centuries. One tends to pick up on things here and there. Besides, I was acquainted with the Rosewoods — Elyria was the one who invented the spell.”

“Yes, I know. We — *I* — found her journal a couple years ago.”

“Ah, yes. Poor woman spent half her life trying to figure out how to bring her husband back. Used the resources right here at Hogwarts on many occasions.”

“When was this?” Lily asked, unable to help her curiosity. “I could tell the journal was old, but I didn’t see any dates.”

“Hmmm. Early 1700s, I believe, give or take a few decades.”

“The spell has been around for that long? Then why doesn’t anyone know about it? I mean, it was obviously a huge discovery.”

“Yes,” Nick agreed. “But to answer that question, one would have to understand the Blacks. Very secretive. Quite possessive of anything they consider their own.”

Lily nodded, remembering how jealously Sirius had guarded her secret, determined to bring her back himself. He’d been horrified by the idea of Severus finding out, of course, but he hadn’t pushed her too hard to let anyone else know either. And the way he’d been with James...

“Anyway,” Nick continued, his transparent eyes taking on a faraway look. “Elyria became a Rosewood when she married, but she was born into the House of Black. I’m sure they all agreed that *Ligatis Animalia* should be kept a family secret. I suppose there wouldn’t have been many occasions to use it though. Probably faded into obscurity after a few generations.”

“That makes sense,” Lily said, giving him a thoughtful look. “But I still don’t understand why you weren’t surprised to see me. Surely you must have heard about what happened at Godric’s Hollow.”

“Yes,” he said, his expression grave. “Terrible tragedy. Allow me to offer my condolences for the loss of your husband.”

“Thank you.”

“But you see, that’s why I wasn’t surprised. His spirit crossed over. Yours did not.”

“How could you know that?”

Nick smiled. “Because I’m dead myself, dear girl. I might be stuck in limbo, but that doesn’t mean I can’t see what happens on the other side. I can even pop over every now and again, exchange pleasantries with old friends and whatnot. I’m just not permitted to stay.”

“So you’ve seen him? James?”

“Oh, yes. Had some lovely conversations over the years.”

“And is he... is he okay?” It was an absurd question to ask about a man who’d been murdered, but Nick seemed to understand.

“Of course he is. They all are over there. The living always say ‘rest in peace’, never realizing how close they are to the truth. Well, unless they’re talking about ghosts, of course.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Honestly, I’m better off this way. Gets dreadfully boring on the other side. Everyone just wanders around with serene expressions on their faces, reliving old memories rather than creating new ones. Suppose they’re happy that way, but I find it much more exciting to have a connection to the world of the living. You know what I mean?”

Lily nodded, even though she didn’t have a clue what he was on about. She was too busy thinking about all the people she’d known who’d died, wanting to ask about her parents before realizing that Nick wouldn’t know who they were. But that brought another question to mind, one she was almost afraid to ask.

“What about Muggles? Are they...”

“Wizard, Muggle, it doesn’t matter. Humans are humans. Shame so many of us have to die to learn that lesson, even worse that some never do. But yes, you’ll see them on the other side.”

She relaxed, flashing him a brilliant smile. “That means I’ll see my parents again someday.”

“Oh, yes, you’re Muggle-born, aren’t you? Well, no shame in that. No shame at all. Back to the point though — your husband is doing just fine. Even better now that his friend has joined him. Sirius Black, was it? Yes, yes... fine boy. A bit rambunctious at times, but...”

“James isn’t my husband anymore,” Lily interrupted, feeling uncomfortable.

“Maybe not in this life, but you’ll be reunited someday. No reason you can’t pick up right where you left off.”

“I... ah, will I have a choice in the matter?”

Nick chuckled. “Of course you will! This is death, not prison. People change, feelings fade. Choosing a partner in life doesn’t have to mean you’re stuck with that person for the rest of eternity. When the time comes, that’ll be your decision.”

“I see,” Lily said, feeling guilty as she let out a sigh of relief. “So you knew I wasn’t dead... well, unless I was a ghost. How did you know I wasn’t?”

“If you’d been a ghost, I would’ve heard about it long before now. People have a way of talking, you know.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true,” she said, then hesitated. “Hey Nick? You won’t tell anyone, will you? Nobody knows, and — well, it could be dangerous for me if the wrong people found out.”

“Dangerous for Headmaster Snape, too, I imagine.”

Lily stared at him, dumbfounded. “Severus? How do you...”

“Well, look at where we are,” Nick said, gesturing at the passageway. “You wouldn’t be here unless you had access to the Headmaster’s quarters, would you?”

"I could have found an opening and entered from the other side."

"Afraid not, dear girl. These passageways are guarded by the same wards that protect those quarters. No one can enter without the Headmaster's permission."

"Well, that's good," Lily said. "But what about the ghosts? Or Peeves?"

Nick shook his head, then cringed as it started to wobble. "Will I ever learn to stop doing that?" he said with a long-suffering sigh. "No, the other ghosts can't pass through here. Peeves certainly cannot. I'm only here because Dumbledore granted me special permissions, which were never revoked upon his death. Not sure how Headmaster Snape would feel about that, but then again, he'll never know unless you tell him."

"I keep your secret, you keep mine?" Lily grinned.

"Sounds like a plan."

"Nick? He isn't evil, you know. Everyone thinks he's this terrible person, but..."

"Not everyone, Lily. I've seen many things over the years... things that even the other ghosts don't know about. I was there when Headmaster Snape made his promise, right after what was assumed to be your death. I was passing on the other side of the wall when I heard the most terrible noises — like the howling of a wounded animal. Five hundred years, and I've never heard a man sound like that. Like someone was ripping his soul right out of his body. And you see, that is the other reason I know."

"Know what?" Lily said, reaching up to wipe away her tears.

"That revealing your secret would endanger you both. Hardly a stretch to assume he's the one who helped you."

"I suppose that makes sense."

"And now he keeps you in his quarters, guarding you like some precious treasure. Frankly, I'm surprised he lets you venture out at all. Isn't he worried that someone might see you?"

"He doesn't..." Lily trailed off, her eyes growing wide. "Oh, bloody hell! I have to go, Nick. I completely forgot..."

The ghost frowned. "Can't you stay a little longer? I'm enjoying our conversation."

"So am I, but I really do need to..."

"It's terribly boring around here these days," he said, his expression morose. "None of the students want to talk anymore, and the other ghosts... well, wouldn't *you* get tired of someone's company after hundreds of years? It's so lovely to be able to converse with the living, especially old friends."

"I really don't think..."

"Please?"

Well, hadn't Charity promised to let her know if Severus showed up? Yes, she'd said she'd stay close to the Entrance Hall, alert for any sign of his return. What was there to worry about, really?

“All right,” Lily said, sighing in resignation. “I suppose I can stay for a few minutes.”

“Brilliant!”

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Severus stopped short, coming face to face with a pair of steel gray eyes.

“Minerva,” he said, not bothering to suppress a sigh of impatience. “This isn’t a good time.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. Do you have any *idea* what those monsters have done? The monsters *you* saw fit to hire?”

With that, he sank into his chair, abandoning any hope of an easy escape.

“Sit down,” he said, jerking his head at an empty seat.

“I will not...”

“You most certainly will if you expect me to listen to your complaints. I’m still your headmaster, after all, and I will not have you towering over me like some kind of...”

“I repeat,” she said, perching on the edge of the chair. “Do you know what they did?”

“From what I understand, a couple students were punished this evening. A Gryffindor and a Hufflepuff, I believe?”

“Yes! They were...”

“They were openly disobedient. As such...”

“*They did nothing wrong!*” Minerva burst out. “And even if they had, that doesn’t excuse the use of an Unforgivable. On a *child*, Severus! How can you allow...”

“You will address me as...”

“There are two children lying in the Hospital Wing tonight.” She leaned forward, glaring at him with daggers in her eyes. “And you’re worried about me using your given name?”

“Fine,” he snapped. “Call me what you like. Just get to the bloody point.”

“The *point*, Severus, is that they should be sacked. They *should* be in Azkaban!”

The worst part was that he agreed with her. He would’ve loved nothing more than to see the Carrows imprisoned for their actions, would’ve enjoyed taking a wand to them himself. But of course, he couldn’t do that, couldn’t even criticize them for what they’d done. On the contrary, he had no choice but to defend them.

Truly, he couldn’t decide who he hated more in that moment: the Dark Lord or Dumbledore.

“That may be your opinion,” he responded, fixing her with an icy stare. “But as it happens, your opinion is irrelevant. You are not in charge of this school, nor do you have the authority to discipline your fellow professors.”

“Even when they have the audacity to...”

“Tell me something, Minerva. Have you assigned detentions this semester? Deducted any House Points?”

“A few. What does that have to do with anything?”

“And have Alecto or Amycus ever tried to interfere with your disciplinary actions?”

“No. But Severus...”

“Then you have no right to interfere with theirs.”

“How can you say that?! As if taking away a few House Points can be compared with...” She trailed off, shaking her head until her tartan nightcap threatened to slip off. “Do you know who came to the aid of those students? I did. I heard them screaming from two floors down. When I got there, they were curled up on the floor, tears streaming down their little faces. Those monsters were already gone... just left them there...”

“Enough,” he said quietly, not wanting to picture the awful scene. “They’re in the Hospital Wing, yes?”

She jerked her head in a curt nod.

“No permanent damage?”

“Poppy said they should be fine by morning.”

“Well then, that’s all that matters. My decision stands.”

“You can’t...”

“Oh, I believe I can.” He leaned back in his chair, giving her his hardest, most uncompromising stare. “If you don’t like it, you’re always free to seek other employment. Beyond that, I’ll simply wish you good night.”

Huffing loudly, she rose from her seat, making it halfway to the door before she stopped in her tracks. “Is that your final word on the subject?”

“It is.”

“Well then, perhaps you should hear mine.”

He sighed, deciding that he owed her this much. “Go on.”

Slowly, she walked back over to the desk, not stopping until she was looming over him. Absurd that anyone could be so intimidating when clad from head to toe in tartan flannel, and yet she was, her breath coming hard as she fixed him with a murderous glare. He remained impassive, resisting the urge to look away.

“Do you remember what I told you the night before term started?”

He searched his memory, then frowned, certain they hadn’t even spoken on that occasion. He’d been too preoccupied with a newly human Lily, caring for her in the Forbidden Forest, then figuring out a way to sneak her up to the school. He hadn’t...

And then suddenly, he remembered the Polyjuice, how strange it had been to see a perfect replica of himself standing in the place of the woman he loved. Lily... she must’ve run into

Minerva on her way up, though he didn't know why she would've failed to mention it. Definitely a discussion they needed to have at some point... if he could ever make it back to his quarters.

"I'm afraid I don't recall your exact words," he said dryly. "Refresh my memory."

Minerva scowled, her nostrils flaring. "I told you that if you hurt those children, if you harmed a single hair on their precious heads, I'd make you regret it."

"Ah, yes. I do remember something about you threatening me." But how had Lily responded? At the moment, he was far more curious about that. "Any other details you wish to repeat?"

"No. I only wanted to remind you that I meant what I said. I'm not stupid, Severus. To act against you now would be suicide. But the day will come when you won't be able to rely on your master's protection. And when that day comes..."

"Flaming vengeance?" Severus said, infusing his voice with every drop of sarcasm he could muster. "I'm looking forward to it. Now get out."

Again, she started to leave, only to pause at the door when he called her name.

"Minerva?"

"What?" she snapped, clutching the knob with a white knuckled fist.

"I might be willing to tolerate your defiance this time. But if you threaten me again, do not expect me to be so lenient."

Without another word, she stormed out, slamming the door so hard that the portraits cried out in dismay. Severus ignored them, more desperate than ever to reach the sanctuary of his quarters. But then a voice called out to him, far more familiar than the rest. He whipped around, snarling in frustration as he met Dumbledore's eyes.

"Did you deliver the sword?"

"Obviously," he said, flinging his cloak on the desk before holding his arms out. "Do you see it anywhere?"

"No need to be so testy, Severus. I only wanted to make sure everything went smoothly."

"Oh, yes. The Dark Lord was overjoyed to receive the sword. So overjoyed, in fact, that he celebrated by stabbing a Muggle in the chest."

Dumbledore frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that. But surely you're not blaming yourself for his actions?"

"Of course not. All I did was place the weapon in his hands. I didn't use the *Cruciatus* on innocent students tonight either. No, I merely hired the bastards who did."

"Believe me, Severus, I don't like it any better than you do, but this is the nature of war. There are bound to be casualties, but..."

"Casualties?" Severus echoed, giving him a scathing look. "And how many more *casualties* will I have to witness before the end?"



Dumbledore sighed. "I wish there was a way for me to make this easier on you, my boy."

"Actually, there is."

"Indeed? Tell me."

"You can leave me the hell alone so I can get some sleep."

"Severus..."

But Severus wasn't listening anymore. He was staring at the cat who'd just streaked across the room, wondering how she'd gotten into his office. And why did she seem so desperate to enter his quarters, yowling as if her tail had caught fire?

"All right," he muttered, opening the door for her before turning back to Dumbledore. "Were you about to remind me how important it is that I carry on with your plan? Fine. That I must continue to play my part? Very well. That under no circumstances am I to reveal my true loyalties, even if I have to watch people die without being able to do a damn thing about it? Message received. But you'll have to forgive me if I don't feel like rehashing every detail of those experiences."

He expected Dumbledore to argue, surprised when the portrait merely nodded in assent. "All right, Severus. Will you at least tell me what happened after the Muggle was murdered? Just the condensed version, if you prefer."

"The Carrows complained about me interfering with their disciplinary efforts. And while I convinced the Dark Lord that restraint might be a wise choice in some cases, there will be others where I won't be able to interfere."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I can't say I'm surprised. You'll just have to..."

"I *know* what I have to do. Now if you don't mind..."

"Anything else to report?"

"No."

"Well then, I'll bid you good night."

Severus didn't bother to respond, sighing in relief as he slipped behind the tapestry. His quarters were quiet — unusually so — making him uneasy as he poked his head in the study. Empty. Could she be in the bathroom? No... the door was wide open, the reflection in the mirror showing no sign of her presence.

Frowning, he headed for the bedroom.

"Lily?"

## 48. Protective Instincts

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### Chapter 48: Protective Instincts

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“In here, Severus!”

Sighing in relief, he opened the bedroom door to find Lily lounging against the pillows, his heart beating faster as she greeted him with a brilliant smile. As usual, he was stunned by her beauty, though he couldn't help noticing that she looked flushed, nor that she'd sounded breathless when she'd called out to him.

“Are you all right?” He stepped closer, grazing her cheek with the tips of his fingers. Warm. A little *too* warm.

“I'm fine. Just got out of a hot bath, that's all.”

Her explanation was reasonable enough, though it still struck him as suspicious. He'd checked the bathroom just a moment before, after all, and hadn't noticed any steam on the mirror. Besides, she had on the same nightgown she'd been wearing earlier, which he instantly recognized since it happened to be his favorite.

And then he remembered something else, cursing under his breath as he stared at her in dismay. “I didn't... you haven't even eaten since Friday night. Bloody hell! Why didn't you say something?”

“You weren't here,” she said with a shrug. “Anyway, there were still a few leftovers. It isn't like I've been sitting here starving.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Biscuits. You've had nothing but biscuits for a day and a half, and you're trying to tell me...”

“Not just biscuits. There were a couple sandwiches, too.”

“No, there weren't,” he said stubbornly. “You gave those to the cat.”

Lily gazed at him for a long moment, her lips twitching. “You don't miss anything, do you?”

“Not if I can help it.” He paused, letting out a heavy sigh. “You should've woken me up. Before I was summoned, you should have...”

“You needed your rest,” she said softly.

“That's hardly the point.”

“Besides, have *you* had anything to eat?”

“No,” he admitted. “But that's different. First, I can go get food whenever I choose. You cannot. Second, I'm quite accustomed to going without...”

"You need to eat, Severus. Far more than I do."

"This isn't about me."

"Yes, it is," she said, and for an odd, uncomfortable moment, her defiant expression reminded him of her son. "You worry about *my* well-being. Why shouldn't I worry about yours?"

"Because..." He trailed off, at a loss for words. Because no one ever had? Because someone giving a shit whether he slept or ate was an alien concept, one he didn't know how to deal with? That was the truth, of course, though he'd be damned if he'd admit it out loud. He didn't want to seem pathetic.

"Because," he repeated, recovering his wits. "Your needs are a higher priority than mine. No, don't interrupt. This is simply the reality of our situation. If I choose not to eat, it isn't because the alternative isn't available to me. It isn't because you've let me down, or..."

"Severus, you didn't let me down. I'm perfectly..."

He cut her off with an exasperated sigh. "Will you let me finish?"

"No." She had her arms crossed over her chest now, a stubborn set to her jaw that told him it would be useless to argue. "Because frankly, Severus, I'd rather starve than have you neglect your own needs for my sake."

"I don't..."

"You do. Say all you want about having more options than I do, but what difference does that make? You go without food, without sleep..."

"I'm a grown man, Lily. I can handle it."

"And I'm a grown woman," she said sweetly. "A grown woman who keeps insisting that she's fine, that the leftovers were enough. But you don't believe me, do you? Even now, I bet you're wondering how soon you can put an end to this conversation so you can fetch breakfast for me."

"Yes, well." He shifted uncomfortably, refusing to meet her eyes. "You need to eat. That has nothing to do with whether I believe you. It's simple logic."

"Exactly," she said, looking triumphant. But before the sting of losing the argument could settle in, she reached over and took his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "That's my point, Severus. It's only natural to worry. That's what we do for the people we love. And I love you. Too much to pretend that I don't care that you might be tired or hungry, or... I can't help it, any more than you can."

With those words, something inside him melted, a world of tension released in a shuddering sigh as he drew her into his arms. "I understand," he said, even though he didn't. Not really. The concept that she loved him that much? It still seemed impossible, and yet he wanted it too badly to question it any further.

And then suddenly, food was the last thing on his mind. All he could think about was her warmth, her closeness, the way the contours of her body fit perfectly against his. Before he knew it, he was kissing her, tongue delving deep into her mouth as he pulled her into his lap.

She tasted like strawberries, which might've struck him as odd if he'd been in a state of mind to contemplate it too much. Instead, it barely registered... he was too busy tugging at the hem of her nightgown, groaning low in his throat as he pulled it over her head.

Before he knew it, she was gloriously naked, lying beneath him as he stared down at her, hardly able to believe she was real. Those lovely green eyes, never more perfect than they were right then, as dark as a midnight forest, drowsy with desire. He gazed into them for a timeless moment before her mouth distracted him, lush and swollen from his kisses, open slightly as her breath came in quiet pants. That drew his attention lower, where he watched her chest rise and fall as if hypnotized until finally, he came to his senses. His head swooped down, mouth closing around a rosy nipple.

After that, it was all a blur, his actions guided by her soft sounds of pleasure. No room for conscious thought, only instinct, driven by the mad desire to explore every inch of her smooth, silky skin. Fingers pushing inside her, head buried between her thighs until she cried out, her body trembling from head to toe as she collapsed against the pillows.

"Severus..."

"Yes, Lily," he muttered, reaching down to unfasten his trousers. Gripping himself with one hand, he braced his weight on the other, shivering in anticipation as the tip of his erection came into contact with...

"Severus, wait!"

He froze, his eyes darting up to meet hers. They were wide open now, filled with unmistakable alarm. Oh fuck... what had he done?

"I'm sorry. I just assumed..."

"No!" She shook her head, letting out a little laugh. "Give me a moment, and then you're free to carry on with your assumptions."

He watched, bewildered, as she reached for her wand. For an irrational moment, he thought she was getting ready to hex his balls off. But then she brought the tip to her abdomen, tracing a pattern he immediately recognized as she murmured an incantation.

An uncomfortable thought flickered through his mind, quickly forgotten as her lips met his, her hips tilting up to draw him in. Bit by torturous bit, until at last, he couldn't take it anymore, plunging deep inside her with a shuddering groan. He wanted to take it slow, to make love to her with a tenderness and restraint he hadn't been able to manage in their first two encounters. But he needed her too much, desperate to forget the terrible events he'd witnessed that night as he lost himself in her exquisite heat. For now, there was nothing in the world except her... fingernails digging into his shoulders, hips rising to meet his again and again as her soft moans echoed in his ears.

"Harder," she whispered.

Nearly losing his mind, he slammed into her with all the strength he had, crushing his mouth against hers. Briefly, he worried that he might hurt her, but she only lifted her legs higher, whimpering in encouragement as she wrapped them around his waist. And then he couldn't restrain himself anymore, bracing his weight on his arms as he set a frenetic pace, eyes fixed on hers. He watched her intently as she began to lose control, holding himself in

check until at last, she cried out in satisfaction, her body going slack as her eyes drifted closed.

He slowed down then, but only slightly, riding out the last waves of her climax as he whispered her name.

“Lily...”

Her eyes opened to meet his, hazy, almost bewildered in the aftermath of her pleasure. And with that, he let out a ragged groan, hips jerking violently as he released himself inside her.

After a moment, he shifted to his side, keeping her body close to his as he brought her leg up to rest on his hip. He was growing soft now, useless, yet still craved the connection of being inside her as they lay there face to face, his forehead pressed against hers. There was no urgency in their kisses now — soft and tender, gentle and sweet. Like the way he’d wanted to make love to her before, as if he had all the time in the world to give her pleasure.

*Next time*, he promised himself, drawing lazy circles on her back with the tips of his fingers.

He’d nearly drifted off to sleep when he remembered the Contraception Charm, troubled by the implications.

“Lily?”

“Hmmm?” she responded, her voice drowsy.

“The charm... we didn’t use it before. And I suppose it’s too late for a potion now. Shit.”

She opened her eyes to look at him, bare shoulder lifting in a shrug. “Don’t worry about it. I’m fine.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I tested myself. Earlier tonight.”

“But I thought...” He trailed off, barely able to utter the word. “Well, pregnancy can’t be detected for at least a week, can it?”

“No, but there are other charms. They can tell you if the timing is ideal.”

Severus frowned, contemplating this. Of course, he knew a fair amount about female reproductive functions — understanding the inner workings of the human body was a necessary part of being a Potions Master. But that didn’t mean he was familiar with all the charms related to such things.

He hesitated, wondering if it would be intrusive to ask for further details. And then he felt ridiculous, realizing how absurd it was to worry about getting too personal under the circumstances.

“This charm...”

“Ovulation Charm,” she finished for him. “Women can’t get pregnant unless...”

“I know.”

“And I’m not, so...”

“Good.” He nodded, relaxing somewhat. “Nonetheless, I should apologize.”

She frowned. “For what?”

“For being so thoughtless. I should’ve been more careful.”

“Well, that’s true for both of us. It’s my responsibility as much as it is yours. Do you blame *me* for forgetting?”

“No, of course not. But that’s not...”

“Don’t even try to tell me it’s not the same thing,” she said, rolling her eyes. “If anything, it’s worse.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Explain.”

“With all the other stress you have to deal with... well, a baby is about the last thing you need right now. Especially one that isn’t wanted.”

“Not wanted from your perspective,” he said quietly, “or from mine?”

He didn’t know where the question had come from, nor why he was holding his breath as he waited for her to respond. He’d never wanted children, after all, so why should he care if she didn’t either? Wouldn’t that be a *good* thing?

*She wanted James Potter’s child*, whispered an insidious voice in the back of his mind, and then he realized why it mattered so much. Jealousy? Not exactly. No, this was about Lily. She’d loved being a mother, had been willing to die to protect her infant son. A love like that... why *wouldn’t* she want another baby?

Even now, he could see the distant longing in her eyes as she pondered his question. Not a question of whether she wanted children, he realized, but whether she’d want *his* children. If she didn’t, it could only mean she didn’t love him the way she’d loved her former husband, that someday, there’d be another man who’d...

“Severus,” she said softly, interrupting his thoughts. “No child of mine would ever be unwanted. Especially yours.”

He grunted in response, trying to ignore the thrill that shot through him at her words.

“But,” she continued. “That isn’t the point. Even if it was something we *both* wanted, this is hardly the time...”

“Why are you so certain that it isn’t?” he asked her abruptly.

She stared at him, her mouth open in shock. “I just assumed... Severus, you *hate* children.”

“No, I don’t. I’m just exceedingly annoyed by them. And even then, it’s not *all* children. There are some I find... tolerable. Besides, it wouldn’t be about me...”

“Oh, please don’t start that again.”

“It would be about both of us,” he finished, giving her a stern look. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Lily, but how I am with you is drastically different than the way I am with the rest of the world. As such, ideas I’d normally find repugnant... well, with you, that might not be the case.”

“I see.” She hesitated, her expression shifting between hope and skepticism. “So you’re saying... not now, of course, but someday...”

“I’m saying I’d be willing to consider it.”

She kissed him then, so hot and fierce that he could no longer doubt her sincerity. But before he could respond properly, she pulled away, pressing a hand to her mouth to stifle a huge yawn.

“I’m sleepy,” she said, in that strangely endearing way she had of pointing out the obvious.

“No kidding,” he said dryly. “But you still need to eat something.”

“Severus...”

“I’ll eat if you do,” he said, realizing for the first time that night that he really was starving.

“Fine,” she mumbled.

Heaving himself out of bed, he gave his shirt and trousers a dismissive glance before reaching for his cloak. Strange... he didn’t remember leaving it hanging on the bed post, though he supposed Lily must have moved it for one reason or another. Wrapping it around himself, he decided that boots and socks would be far too much trouble before trudging out to his office.

Withdrawing his wand from his sleeve, he tapped on his desk, pleased by the food that instantly appeared. Not the usual platter of sandwiches he’d come to expect, but a nice, hot breakfast, complete with eggs, sausages, bacon, and a large pile of toast along with a bowl of strawberry jam. There was even a steaming pot of coffee, the fragrance of freshly roasted beans making his mouth water as he gathered everything up and carried it into his quarters.

“Lily?”

She was sound asleep, which he really should’ve expected. He set down the platter, wondering if he should wake her before letting out a sigh of defeat, reaching out to pull the blankets up instead. He still hated that she’d gone so long without a decent meal, especially since he was to blame for her deprivation. But he also had to admit that she wasn’t like him — if she’d truly been hungry, she would’ve said so, or at least stayed up long enough to eat something. She’d never been one for self-denial.

He took the food into the study, preserving a large portion with a Stasis Charm before fixing a plate for himself. Settling himself into a chair, he began to eat, dwelling on the conversation they’d just had.

A child of his own... how did he really feel about that concept?

For most of his life, it would’ve been a definite “no”, but now that conviction was tangled up with a dozen other emotions, most of which he couldn’t even begin to sort out. This was

Lily, after all, not some faceless woman he'd only thought about in an abstract sense. As such, it was impossible to imagine their child as some anonymous brat. No, it would be part of him... part of her...

Could he love such a child? He didn't know. But then he realized that it didn't matter, since he wasn't likely to live long enough to find out.

And that was the thought that changed everything.

"Not now, of course," Lily had said. "But someday."

How was he supposed to tell her that "someday" wasn't an option, that this truly was a case of now or never?

Severus stared out the window, unable to believe he was even considering the idea that had taken root in his mind. But it persisted nonetheless, forcing him to weigh the pros and cons as he imagined getting Lily pregnant... right here, right now, while he still had the chance.

Part of his reasoning was selfish. He had to admit that. The idea of leaving a part of himself with her, ensuring that he'd never be forgotten? Well, perhaps that wasn't so bad, but what about the jealousy, the possessiveness, the lingering resentment? What about the part of him that couldn't stand the thought of Potter leaving her with a child if he couldn't do the same?

It was spiteful. He knew it, and yet he couldn't help himself. Maybe he'd never be on equal footing with his former nemesis, but he wanted to be more than just a poor replacement, more than a man who'd simply been there to warm her bed for a while. He wanted to leave her with proof of his devotion, something permanent and real.

And what about Lily? What would it mean for her? That was the real issue, far more important than his own jumbled emotions. She'd be the one left to deal with the consequences, after all. Alone and pregnant... or with a newborn child if he managed to live long enough for her to give birth. The thought of abandoning her, particularly in such a vulnerable position... well, that was intolerable. And when her son died...

Severus choked, spilling coffee down the front of his robe.

*This* was the solution, wasn't it? The only way to make sure she wouldn't be left alone, no matter what happened to the boy or himself. If she was pregnant, had another child to consider, she'd still have something to live for, a reason to fight back against her despair. Not a replacement, surely... even Severus wasn't heartless enough to believe that one child could simply be switched out for another. But it would give her an alternative, the will to carry on when all else seemed lost.

But that wasn't all. What about the final confrontation? What if Lily was there when it happened? That was the thought that haunted his dreams, the paralyzing fear that he wouldn't be able to stop her, that she'd get herself killed in a futile attempt to protect her son. But what if she happened to be pregnant at the time? Wouldn't she be less likely to hurl herself at certain death if that meant risking her unborn child?

Rising to his feet, Severus paced the room, more convinced by the second that this was the right course of action. A perfect plan? Perhaps not. But it could very well be the one that saved her life. She was already destined to lose so much, and there wasn't a damn thing he



could do to stop it. If he could just leave her with *something*... someone to protect, to love... a reason to keep fighting...

How could he turn his back on that chance?

Of course, convincing her wasn't going to be easy. Not that he thought she'd mind getting pregnant — despite all her arguments about the war, the timing, the stress on him, that longing in her eyes had been unmistakable. But how was he supposed to explain his sudden enthusiasm for the idea? It wasn't like he could tell her the truth — that he was doing it for her sake, his last, most desperate attempt to save her when his own days were numbered. He had to find a way to justify it somehow, make her believe this was really what he wanted.

How? He wasn't sure just yet. But he was certain that the answer would come to him sooner or later.

Satisfied with that thought, Severus cleaned up the remainder of his breakfast, making sure Lily's food was still hot beneath the Stasis Charm before heading back to the bedroom. Unclasping his cloak, he tossed it at a nearby chair as he made his way toward the bed.

*Thud.*

He stopped in his tracks, gaping at the object as it rolled across the floor. When it reached his feet, he picked it up, frowning in bewilderment as he examined the shiny green apple.

Where the hell had it come from? And how, exactly, had it ended up in the pocket of his cloak?

## 49. Necessary Deceptions

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### Chapter 49: Necessary Deceptions

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Lily slipped out of bed, wrapping herself in Severus's discarded shirt before making her way to the study. Assuming he'd already left for the day, she was surprised to see him sitting at the table, his dark head bent over a stack of parchment as his quill moved steadily across the page.

Smiling, she opened her mouth to greet him, swallowing a gasp instead.

In front of him were three shiny apples, perfectly arranged in a row. The same apples she'd tucked into the pocket of his cloak the night before, immediately forgotten when she'd noticed all the other food the pantry had to offer. Granted, she might've remembered them when she'd returned to their quarters, but she'd barely had a chance to whip off the cloak and settle herself in bed before she'd heard him calling her name.

"Um..."

Severus glanced up, scrutinizing her face before following the direction of her eyes. But he said nothing about the apples, merely nodded at the empty chair on the other side of the table.

"Sit down. Eat."

Only then did she notice the platter that had been set out for her, piled high with eggs, sausage, bacon, and toast. She couldn't imagine how she was supposed to eat with her stomach churning with anxiety, but clearly, this wasn't the time for resistance.

"You look lovely this morning," he said, his eyes moving from her tumbled hair to the half unbuttoned shirt she was wearing. They lingered on her bare legs for a long moment before he let out a sigh, returning his attention to his paperwork.

"Thanks," she muttered, unnerved by his apparent calm. Settling herself in her chair, she nibbled on a piece of toast, studying the sharp lines of his profile beneath the curtain of hair. If he sensed her watching him, he gave no indication of it, head bent low as he filled the page with line after line of elegant scrawl.

She managed to finish a piece of toast along with a bit of bacon before she let out a heavy sigh, pushing the platter away.

Finally, Severus glanced up. "Finished?"

"Yes."

He nodded, setting his quill down as he leaned back in his chair. "Now," he said quietly, picking up one of the apples for a brief inspection before setting it back on the table. "Care to explain?"

"I..."

"I'm sure you can imagine my surprise. Not that I've never slipped a bit of food in my pocket, mind you. But green apples? I've never been fond of them. Too tart for my taste. I prefer the red ones."

Lily pulled out her wand, muttering an incantation that transformed the apples to a bright, glossy red.

Severus's lips twitched. "Ah, I'm afraid it's too late for that, my dear."

"Okay, fine," she said, letting out an exaggerated sigh. "Charity got them for me."

"Charity?" He frowned. "You're telling me that a *cat*..."

"No, of course not. She switched to an owl, obviously. Flew in through the window. I know you said it was safer not to open them, but it was the middle of the night, and I was hungry, and..." She trailed off, relaxing somewhat as his expression began to soften.

"And how did they end up in the pocket of my cloak?"

"I put it on when I opened the window. It was cold, and... well, I don't know if you've noticed, but I like wearing your clothes."

His eyes drifted down, fixing on the button up shirt that had slipped down to expose a bare shoulder. "Trust me," he said softly. "I've noticed."

Rising from her chair, she walked around the table, coming up behind him and wrapping her arms around his neck. "You don't mind, do you?"

He huffed. "Certainly not."

"Good."

"What I *do* mind, however, is you opening the window. Last night was one thing, but it mustn't happen again. Agreed?"

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry, Severus."

"Don't be. It wasn't as if I left you much choice."

"I could've waited until you got back."

He shook his head. "I'm glad you didn't. Besides, it's good to know you have an alternative, even if it should only be used as a last resort. Promise me..."

"I promise," she interrupted, relieved that technically, she wasn't lying. Why should she need to open the windows when she had the passageways at her disposal?

But that thought was followed by a rush of guilt, leaving her wondering if she should tell him the truth. Maybe if she could make him understand how safe the passages were, that no one could even access them unless they also had permission to enter the Headmaster's quarters...

No... he'd panic at the idea of her gallivanting around the castle, insisting that there was still a chance she might get caught when she emerged on the other side. He was far too

intelligent to believe she merely wanted to wander up and down a bunch of dusty passageways. Why would she be using them at all unless she had somewhere to go?

At best, he'd worry over her excessively. At worst? He'd forbid it altogether, might even find a way to seal off the passages so she could no longer use them. He was headmaster, after all, his powers virtually limitless. She'd be forced to go back to the way things were before, shut up day and night with no contact with the outside world. The mere thought of it made her feel claustrophobic, effectively silencing her as she leaned forward to kiss his cheek.

In response, he pulled her down onto his lap, his mouth covering hers as he slipped a hand inside her shirt. He stroked her breast with gentle fingers, swallowing her soft whimper as his thumb flickered back and forth across her nipple. But just when his lips had moved down to her neck, those same fingers making quick work of her buttons, there was a jangling noise in the distance, as loud as it was unpleasant.

"Damn," he muttered, sighing heavily as he urged her off his lap. "So much for taking the weekend off."

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Scowling, Severus strode across his office, snatching the door open to find the Carrows waiting on the other side. They didn't bother to hide their excitement, an unnerving contrast to the terrified expressions of the three students who cowered behind them.

"Yes?" he snapped.

"Afternoon, Headmaster," Alecto said. "Orders were that major infractions should be reported directly to you."

"Fine. Get in here."

Severus wasn't exactly cheerful to begin with, but his mood darkened even further as he recognized the position he was in. This was his first test, the crucial moment where he needed to prove to the Dark Lord that he wasn't too soft, that his punishments could be swift and uncompromising.

Jerking his head at the row of empty chairs, he settled himself behind his desk as the others scrambled to obey his unspoken order. And then he leaned forward, glowering at each of them in turn. "Well?"

"Headmaster," Amycus said, his beady eyes flashing with anticipation. "These children have committed a terrible offense."

"Indeed? And what would that be?"

"Defacing school property. Painting filthy, traitorous messages all over the walls!"

"Messages?" He frowned. "Where? What do they say?"

"Down on the third floor." Alecto said. "On the second floor, too, in three separate places. Says, 'Dumbledore's Army. Now recruiting.'"

"I see. And you're telling me these three are the culprits?"

Amycus nodded.

Severus leaned back, giving the children a skeptical look. Michael Corner? He might believe that one, but the other two? William Willoughby was a third-year Ravenclaw, a quiet, studious boy who'd always kept to himself, never causing even a hint of trouble. And the girl... Severus couldn't recall her name or even what house she was in, but the simple fact that she was a first year made him doubt her involvement.

"How can you be sure?" he said, returning his attention to the Carrows.

"Caught them hanging around the scene of the crime. Paint wasn't even dry yet."

He raised an eyebrow. "Hanging around, or simply walking by?"

"Knew he'd make excuses for them," Alecto muttered to her brother, a comment Severus obviously wasn't supposed to hear.

"I'm not making excuses for anyone," he said coldly, standing up and striding to the window. "I'm far more interested in finding the real culprits. Why waste time punishing innocents while the guilty parties roam free? To that end... come over here, girl."

She clung to her seat, staring at him in horror.

"I will not ask you twice."

Rising to her feet, she hesitated, until a rough shove from Alecto propelled her in his direction. Reflexively, he reached out to steady her, then withdrew his wand from his sleeve. She let out a little scream, backing away until she was pressed against the wall. But then he bent down, pitching his voice so low that the others couldn't possibly overhear.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Promise."

The girl instantly relaxed, just as he'd expected. She was still young enough to believe that promises couldn't be broken, that anyone who uttered that word meant what they said. Life at Hogwarts would soon prove otherwise, of course, but at least he wouldn't be the one responsible for that rude awakening.

"*Legilimens*," he said, just before he invaded her mind. He hated himself even for this, but it was the only way he could hope to satisfy the Dark Lord without inflicting physical pain.

Gently, he skimmed along the surface of the girl's thoughts, not surprised by what he found there. She'd been returning from the Great Hall, had hesitated just long enough to stare at the message in bewilderment when Alecto had come upon her.

Satisfied, he withdrew.

"Thank you," he said, his voice stern but not unkind. "You may go."

Flashing him a grateful look, the girl scampered from the room.

"Headmaster," Alecto whined. "You can't just..."

"Let the girl leave when I've just seen conclusive proof of her innocence? I most certainly can. Mr. Willoughby? Approach me, please."

The boy obeyed him instantly, though his eyes were full of fear. Severus did his best to ignore it, brandishing his wand with a shout of, “*Legilimens!*” The Dark Lord would like that, loud and forceful. He’d never know that the invasion itself was as subtle as it could be. It only took Severus a few seconds to see that Willoughby had spent the entire day in the library, mind preoccupied with some obscure Arithmency theory as he’d wandered back to Ravenclaw Tower. He hadn’t even noticed the message until a hand shot out from the alcove, snatching him by the arm.

Lowering his wand, Severus nodded. “That will do, Mr. Willoughby. You may return to your studies.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now then. Mr. Corner?”

“Uh-uh. No way. I’m not letting you inside my head!”

“I’m afraid you don’t have a choice. Approach me.”

“No.”

“Guilty,” Alecto said. “Obviously.”

“It would appear so,” Severus agreed. “Granted, I might be willing to forego certain measures in exchange for a full confession...”

“I did it, okay?” the boy shouted, jaw set stubbornly despite the panic in his eyes. “It was me. Now can we get on with my punishment? I have homework to do.”

“However...”

“I just *told* you...”

“Silence, Mr. Corner!” Severus snapped, striding across the room to loom over the boy’s chair. “*However*, your admission of guilt fails to address other pertinent questions. For instance, it doesn’t tell us who assisted you. It doesn’t explain why you felt you had the right to damage school property. Nor does it...”

“No one helped me. I did it myself.”

Severus smirked. “Oh, I hardly believe that. If the message had only appeared once, then yes, I might be convinced. But multiple times? Don’t insult my intelligence. Mr. Corner. Now, you have three choices. One, you may go ahead and name the other culprits. Two, you can allow me to examine your thoughts. Or three, I can extract the information by force. Whichever you choose, understand that you will not be leaving this office until I know the truth.”

The boy sat silent, glaring at him with mutinous eyes.

“Well?”

There was a shuffle from behind, followed by a low, rasping voice. “*Cruc...*”

“*Expelliarmus!*” Severus roared, whipping around and pointing his wand at Amycus in one smooth motion. The squat little man flew backward, landing on his backside with a painful

sounding thud.

“How *dare* you...”

He turned to Alecto, silencing her with a cutting look. “I don’t recall giving your brother permission to interfere.”

“When the Dark Lord hears of this...”

“Please, feel free to tell him. I’d like to know what he thinks about the two of you causing a disruption right when I’m on the verge of obtaining crucial information. Information that, I assure you, will be far more nuanced than the boy’s screams of pain.”

Not bothering to respond, Alecto scurried over to her brother, bending down to help him to his feet. Satisfied, Severus returned his attention to his student.

“I... uh, I’ll go with the second option, I guess.”

“A wise choice, Mr. Corner. *Legilimens!*”

Immediately, Severus understood why the boy had submitted so easily. Unlike his predecessors, he was delusional enough to believe he had the strength to fight back. One irrelevant memory after another thrust forward, followed by feeble attempts to push him out. Foolish child. Did he really think it was going to be that easy?

After a moment, Severus withdrew, turning to Alecto. “Go downstairs. I want you to fetch Miss Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Lovegood. Bring them to me immediately.”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

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Lily hadn’t intended to leave the quarters that day, especially after the close call with the apples. When the urge came upon her, she managed to resist, wandering from room to room while attempting to ignore the shiny silver buttons. How easy it would be to give one of them a push, to take a short walk and come straight back. Just five minutes to ease her restlessness... really, what were the odds that Severus would return in that brief stretch of time?

Sighing heavily, she pushed the thought away, stripping off her clothes as she headed into the bathroom. What she needed was a nice, long bath to help her relax, followed by a good book. That would be a sensible way to pass the time until Severus got back.

*Whoops. Sorry!*

She gasped, whirling around to face the cat who’d just materialized behind her.

“Oh, um, it’s all right,” she said, reaching for a towel to wrap around herself. “I was just getting ready to take a bath.”

*I can see that. Well, don’t let me disturb you.*

“You’re not disturbing me,” she insisted. “Really, I’m glad for the company.”

That was an understatement, she realized. There was something terribly lonely about these quarters when no one else was around, constant reminders of how shut off she was from the world. Granted, not having anyone to talk to wasn't so bad — she'd gotten used to that after so many years without a voice. But not being able to see people, to hear them speak or even observe them from afar? That was more isolation than she could take sometimes.

"Where have you been?" she asked Charity, sitting down on the edge of the tub and giving the cat a scratch under the chin.

*Spying on Severus.*

The thought was echoed back to her without a hint of shame. It seemed odd at first, until she remembered that she'd been the same way. It hadn't felt like eavesdropping when she'd been an animal, especially on those occasions where she couldn't have avoided it if she'd tried.

Besides, her limitations had made it a necessity. It wasn't as if she'd been able to have regular conversations with the people around her. Listening in was the only way she'd been able to find out how they were doing, if they were in trouble, or in a few cases, whether she might be able to help.

Yet being human... was it really so different? True, she could talk to Severus now, could ask him anything she wanted. But would he tell her the truth? All along, she'd suspected that he went out of his way to shield her from unpleasant information, and of course, he'd always been the type to pretend he was fine even if he wasn't. And hadn't her trip to the Hospital Wing proven that she didn't have the faintest clue what was going on around the school? Unforgivables used on students... Severus had never even hinted at such things.

"Spying on him?" she said aloud. "Where is he? What is he doing?"

*Shut up in his office with the Carrows. Seems he's got a bit of a rebellion on his hands.*

"Oh no... what happened?"

*Some of the students painted messages all over the walls. 'Dumbledore's Army. Now recruiting'.*

"The DA?" Lily stared at her, nonplussed. "That can't be good."

*You're familiar with... nevermind, of course you are. Harry...*

"You haven't heard anything about him, have you?"

*Not much.* The cat gave her a sympathetic look. *The students mention him here and there whenever the Carrows aren't around, but nobody seems to know where he is.*

"Oh," Lily said, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

*You know, that's probably for the best. If his friends don't know where he's hiding, there's a good chance his enemies don't either.*

"I know. I just... I wish there was something I could do. Sitting here day after day, shut up alone, all I do is worry. I'm always hoping this will be the day that Severus comes back with news, and yet I dread it at the same time. And you know what the worst part is?"



*What's that?*

Lily hesitated, letting out a heavy sigh. "Even if Severus *did* know something, I can't be sure he'd tell me. Not if it was something bad. I mean, he promised he would, and I *want* to believe him, but..."

*How much do you know?*

"Only that Harry's in hiding and You-Know-Who wants to kill him. But of course, everyone knows that. I also know that he's off hunting for these... objects that need to be destroyed. What I *don't* understand is why he has to be the one to do it — he's little more than a child! And to make matters worse, I think Dumbledore expected him to be the one to kill You-Know-Who. Again, I don't know why... maybe Dumbledore wanted to take the credit? He's the one who mentored Harry, after all, though if you ask me..."

She trailed off, realizing the cat was giving her a peculiar look.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to go off like that. It's just frustrating, especially since there's nothing I can do. I can't even talk to Severus about it, you know... well, I suppose I *could*, but... it's complicated."

*The two of them have never gotten on well, have they?*

Lily laughed. "You might say that. That's only part of it though. Regardless of how Severus feels about Harry, he's always done his best to protect him. Even now, he's doing everything he can, though I know it frustrates him to be shut up here at Hogwarts all the time. What Dumbledore made him do..."

*Trapped him.*

"Yes," Lily agreed. "How can I tell him how worried I am about Harry, or ask him constantly whether he's heard anything? I'd only be reminding him how powerless he is, and trust me, the last thing Severus needs is another reason to feel bad about himself."

*Sparing his feelings at the expense of your own? It has to be difficult keeping all that to yourself.*

"Difficult, but necessary."

*Still, it isn't like you have to sit here in the dark. Now that you know about the passageways...*

"Charity..." Lily looked down at the cat, her lips twitching. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

*Spying? I most certainly am.*

"On Severus?"

*Why not?*

"You don't think that would be... well, *wrong*? I mean, I had no problem spying on Dumbledore, but that was different. Severus is..."

*Your lover?*

Lily smiled. "Something like that. But you see my point, don't you? Relationships are supposed to be about communication and honesty, and..."

*And you just told me that you're afraid he's hiding things from you. You also told me that you don't want to question him too much about what's going on. Because you don't want to upset him, correct?*

"Yes, but..."

*Well then, there's your answer.*

"Okay, maybe you have a point, but still... it's not like I can just go running off whenever I want. Do you know how close I came to getting caught last night? Barely had time to throw off my cloak and dive into bed before he came in. Not even *my* cloak, but his. He nearly found out what I'd done because I was stupid enough to leave a bunch of apples in his pocket."

*But you found a way around it, right?*

"I told him you'd switched to an owl and brought them in through the window."

The sound of Charity's laughter rang in her head. *Which sounds much more believable than the truth. At any rate, lesson learned. You won't be doing that again, will you?*

"Definitely not."

*As for you nearly getting caught, it wouldn't have been such a close thing if he'd come in through the Entrance Hall. I would've seen him in plenty of time. If he's here at the school though, it'll be much easier.*

"Maybe," Lily said, giving her a skeptical look.

*And if he's in his office, it's almost failproof.*

"How?"

*Well, any one of the passages loops around the office. Use the one in here, and you can just shut the bathroom door. He won't be able to make it back quicker than you can, but even if he does, he'll just assume you're using the toilet.*

"Charity!"

*Or taking a bath, if you prefer. You can even cast a charm on the water so he'll hear it splashing around a bit. He'll never know the difference. I mean, it's not like he's going to burst in on you if he thinks you're taking a bath, is it?*

"Well, I could lock the door, I suppose."

*There you go.*

Lily wavered for a moment, but once her mind was made up, there was no hesitation. She hurried to the bedroom, straight to the wardrobe where she pulled out a set of emerald green robes. She'd never worn them — during her first few weeks as a human, nightgowns had been the only clothing she'd found comfortable. But robes felt more natural to her now, soft fabric swishing around her ankles as she made her way back to the bathroom.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Their destination wasn’t far. She’d gone perhaps a dozen steps before Charity told her to stop, pointing out a crack in the wall. She had to crouch down to see through it, not sure they were even in the right place until a tall, black clad figure passed through her line of vision.

“Well, Mr. Longbottom,” she heard him say, the tone of his voice so cold it sent a chill up her spine. “Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood? What do you have to say for yourselves?”

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Repeat offenders. Wonderful.

Severus glowered down at the children, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do. Deduct a few House Points, hand out detentions? No... going easy on these three wasn’t an option. The Dark Lord had already seen the memory of them trying to steal the sword, after all. Even a shred of mercy now would mean putting his own position in peril. And how much more would the students suffer if he wasn’t here to provide a buffer?

“Well? I asked the three of you a question. I expect a response.”

Ginny Weasley sat silent, staring down at her hands as Luna Lovegood gazed out the window with a dreamy expression on her face. For all Severus knew, neither had even heard his question. Only Neville Longbottom met his eyes directly, showing no hint of fear. As before, he felt a faint stirring of respect, finding the boy much more tolerable now that he’d abandoned the persona of a sniveling coward. Nonetheless, he’d chosen the worst possible time to grow a spine.

“Mr. Longbottom?”

“You can’t expect us not to defend ourselves.”

“Defend yourselves?” Severus fixed him with a cold, contemptuous stare. “Against what, exactly?”

“People who want to hurt us,” Luna said quietly, her frank honesty throwing him off guard as it usually did.

“And who would that be?”

“The Carrows,” she responded without hesitation. “You. Although I don’t think you’re like them. Not really. They enjoy hurting us, while you...”

“Enough, Miss Lovegood.” Severus cleared his throat, directing his attention elsewhere. “Perhaps the three of you are too feeble-minded to grasp the obvious, but without these acts of disobedience, none of you would have anything to defend yourselves against. If you simply obeyed the rules...”

“The rules?” Longbottom echoed. “What rules would those be? Hating Muggles? Pretending Dumbledore was our enemy? Or how about acting like we support the monster who’s out there trying to murder our friend?”

“Your *friend*,” Severus sneered. “Oh yes, it all comes back to Potter. I should’ve known. That lazy, arrogant...”

“Harry is *not*...”

“*Silence*, Miss Weasley! As I was saying before you rudely interrupted, the boy is as selfish as he is incompetent. Only a fool with a death wish would pin their hopes on him. Once the Dark Lord discovers his whereabouts...”

“That’s not going to happen!” Neville shouted.

“Oh, it will,” Severus said, his voice low and dangerous. “Granted, Potter is buying himself time, hidden away like the miserable coward he is. But the Dark Lord will find him sooner or later. Of that, I can assure you. And when he does... well, let’s just say the three of you might want to rethink your loyalties before it’s too late.”

“Never!”

“Ah, Miss Weasley. Just for that, you can go first.”

“First?” The girl’s face turned pale, though her expression remained one of stubborn defiance.

“Your punishment, naturally. As much as I’m enjoying this little chat of ours, I do have other duties to attend to this afternoon. You two,” he said, jerking his head at the door. “Wait outside.”

“No way,” Longbottom said, half rising from his chair with his fists clenched. “We’re not leaving her alone with you.”

At that point, Severus was grateful for two things. One, that he’d sent the Carrows away, and two, that he’d had the presence of mind to confiscate the children’s wands when they’d first arrived. He had a plan, but it would only work if he could isolate each of them in turn, something he’d prefer to do without having to disarm any of them by force.

“You will, Mr. Longbottom,” he said quietly. “Trust me, it’ll go much worse for her if you don’t.”

The boy’s obstinate refusals soon gave way to resignation. Shooting Severus a poisonous look, he rose and left the room with Luna trailing just behind.

“Now, Miss Weasley,” Severus said, coming around the desk to stand in front of her. “Where is Mr. Potter?”

She snorted. “I don’t know. And I wouldn’t tell you even if I did, so...”

“I thought you might say that. *Legilimens!*”

This was no quick examination like the ones he’d performed before. Instead, he chose to linger in her head, knowing that the Dark Lord would be far more pleased if he believed this had been a thorough examination. Nonetheless, Severus tried to preserve the girl’s privacy as much as possible, shying away from a memory that threatened to reveal details of her physical relationship with Potter. Instead, he chose to focus on the dull minutiae of Quidditch practice and family dinners at the Burrow, until finally, he withdrew.

One thing he *did* learn, however, was that she was telling the truth. She had no clue where the boy might be.

The next thing he did made him feel ridiculous, but false memories were always stronger when they had some basis in truth. And so he lifted his wand again, gratified by the cry of terror that could only help his cause as he began hurling harmless spells in her direction.

Finally, he stepped closer, pointing his wand directly between her eyes as he uttered a final spell.

*“Confundo.”*

She slumped down in her chair, looking dazed.

“Miss Weasley,” he said quietly. “You will forget what happened in this room. If anyone asks, you will refuse to speak of it. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Furthermore, you will not be so careless again. You will act with the utmost caution, making sure that the Carrows do not catch you in any further acts of rebellion. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

He nodded. “Very well. You may go. Please send in Miss Lovegood on your way out.”

Twice more, he went through the ritual, sinking back in his chair with a sigh of relief when it was done. And then he gathered up the recollections of all those harmless spells he’d cast, transforming them into incantations that were dark and sinister, savage enough to satisfy even the Dark Lord himself. He didn’t have to fake the screams — those he plucked from memory, modifying them to suit his purpose.

When the Dark Lord examined his thoughts again, he’d see the brutal invasion of three students’ minds, a relentless quest for any scrap of information regarding Potter’s whereabouts. Following that, there would be scenes of torture, woven together so seamlessly that he’d never think to question them. And thanks to the Confundus Charm, none of the children would ever be able to reveal the truth. Even if the worst should happen, if one of them was captured and the Dark Lord plundered through their mind, he’d find nothing but confusion, a common side effect of some of the more severe curses Severus had pretended to use.

He didn’t return to his quarters until well after nightfall, surprised to discover that Lily was already in bed. Exhausted himself, he stripped down to his trousers, sliding in behind her and wrapping an arm around her waist. Her eyes remained closed, but he could tell by the rhythm of her breathing that she wasn’t asleep.

“Lily?” he whispered, brushing her hair aside to kiss her neck.

“Not now, Severus. I’m tired.”

And with that, she pulled away, retreating to the other side of the bed.

## 50. Incommunicado

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### Chapter 50: Incommunicado

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For three days, Lily had been struggling to come to terms with what she'd seen in Severus's office. She knew she needed to talk to him, but how? Whenever she tried, something inside her always shut down, cringing away from the awful things she'd witnessed. Those nasty comments about Harry... could she honestly pretend that it was all part of the act, that there wasn't even a hint of truth behind his words?

*"Selfish, lazy, arrogant..."*

He'd said those things before, after all, and he'd meant them. Did he still feel that way? If so, was it ever likely to change?

She'd hoped they'd be able to resolve their differences, that their love for her would be reason enough to make peace with one another. But what if it wasn't? What if she was forced to choose? The idea of living without Severus was heartbreaking, and yet Harry was her only child. She'd spent half her life waiting to have a proper relationship with him. To do anything that might compromise that, create distance between them or even make him hate her? Just the thought of it brought tears to her eyes.

Maybe getting involved with Severus had been a mistake. Maybe she should've waited, should've kept her feelings to herself until she'd seen whether his relationship with Harry could be salvaged. But it was too late now, and in truth, she couldn't regret what she'd done. Selfish, perhaps, but she had her own needs, which were hard to ignore after spending nearly two decades in isolation. Was it so wrong that she wanted to be loved, to be held and touched, when she'd been forced to live without human contact for so many years? And what about Severus, who was perhaps even more starved for affection than she was? Was it so terrible that she wanted to do whatever she could to make him happy?

Perhaps not, and yet it could easily seem like a betrayal in Harry's eyes. The father he'd idolized versus the man he'd despised for years? She could picture him screaming at her for insulting James's memory, demanding to know why she'd chosen his nemesis, of all people. How could she make him understand that Severus had been an irreplaceable part of her life since long before James had entered the picture, that the bond between them ran so much deeper than the one she'd shared with his father?

More than that, how could she explain that she loved Severus for Harry's sake, too? That she didn't love him *despite* how he'd treated her son, but in many ways, *because* of it? How could she make him understand that harsh words, insults, or unnecessary punishments seemed trivial compared with the sacrifices Severus had made?

How, when deep down, she had yet to come to terms with the "trivial" things herself?

Lily sighed, stepping out of the bathtub and wrapping herself in a towel before heading into the study to check the time. Not even 4 PM? Good. Maybe by the time he got back, she would've found a way to work through her confusion, might be ready to talk rather than shutting him out.

But how? Their issues with Harry were complicated enough, but that was only part of it. There was the war, of course, the fact that her ignorance ran much deeper than she'd assumed. And then there was Hogwarts, the disconcerting realization that she didn't have a clue what Severus did outside these quarters. Naturally, she'd assumed he was strict, but using Legilimency on his students? Why would he do such a thing?

She knew Dumbledore had wanted him to protect the students, shielding them from the real Death Eaters. But how was he *protecting* them by invading their minds? Why did he have to be so cold, so harsh, doing everything in his power to intimidate children who already had to be terrified?

If the Carrows had been around, it would've made sense. Obviously, he would've had to put on an act for their benefit, since whatever he did would probably be reported to Voldemort. But to behave that way when he was alone with the children?

*"Legilimens!"*

As soon as she'd heard the word, she'd fled straight back to their quarters, too horrified to watch the rest. But ever since, she'd tried to convince herself that there had to be a reason, that he wasn't being cruel just for the sake of it. And yet the fact that he'd told her so little, that he'd gone out of his way to hide what he was doing? That cast doubt over the entire situation, making it seem like he was leading two separate lives. How was she supposed to deal with a man who suddenly felt like a stranger?

It didn't help matters that she was acting like a stranger herself, keeping her distance as she tried to deal with her confusion. They hadn't made love in three days, hadn't even had a conversation beyond mild pleasantries. And after that first night, she'd even taken to sleeping on the couch, hating herself as she'd listened to him tossing and turning in the other room. But she hadn't known what else to do, uncomfortable with the idea of being close to him when there was so much she didn't know. She wanted to trust him, and yet why didn't he trust *her* enough to tell her the truth? Why the secrecy, the silence, his determination to pretend that everything was all right, when clearly, it wasn't?

"What's wrong?" he'd asked her that morning, his voice subdued. "Have I done something to offend you?"

"Of course not," she'd said, and for the most part, it was true. She felt unnerved, conflicted, resented him for keeping her in the dark. But she couldn't say that he'd mistreated her, or that his behavior where she was concerned had ever been an issue.

No... it was his behavior toward others that she couldn't seem to reconcile.

Unfortunately, she hadn't known how to say that, and so she'd chalked it up to a peculiar mood, assuring him that it would pass. She'd even let him kiss her goodbye, though she'd pulled away almost immediately, mumbling something about needing to feed the cat.

"I suppose I'll go to work then," he'd said. "I'll see you this evening."

And then she'd seen it — a flicker of pure anguish in his eyes just before he'd turned away. The door had barely closed before she'd burst into tears, hating herself for questioning him, frustrated at her inability to fix the rift between them. A rift *she'd* created, after all, even if that had never been her intention. And in that moment, she'd come to a decision.

No matter what happened, she'd find a way to talk to him tonight.

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Severus set his quill down, leaning back in his chair with a long-suffering sigh. He'd barely made a dent in the pile of correspondence that required his attention, but at the moment, he didn't have it in him to tackle the rest.

To say it had been a difficult week was an understatement. Bad enough that the Carrows were growing bolder by the day, ever on the lookout for the "minor infractions" that the Dark Lord had given them permission to deal with themselves. Twice now, he'd been summoned to the Hospital Wing, doing his best to ignore Poppy's murderous glare. The first time, it had been the Cruciatus — apparently what Alecto had seen as a reasonable punishment for a student who'd been late to class. And the second time, he'd never even discovered what offense the child had committed. No, he'd been too busy attempting to neutralize the effects of a curse Poppy hadn't known how to treat herself.

The worst part was how surprised she'd looked as he'd knelt down beside the student, tracing his wand over the wounds. As if she thought he was a monster, that she'd expected him to walk away and let the little girl die.

But of course, that was exactly what she was *supposed* to think. He had a part to play, after all, which he could've done more effectively if he'd turned a blind eye as she'd expected him to do. But there were limits to what he could stomach, even if that meant incurring the Dark Lord's wrath. Leaving a child to writhe in agony, knowing she was doomed to a slow, painful death without treatment? No... not when he'd had another option.

"Why do you allow it?" Poppy had asked him when he'd finished. "You don't want this, Severus, surely."

"What I want is of no consequence," he'd said, giving her a dismissive look before striding from the room.

That had been the first night he'd returned to his quarters to find Lily sleeping on the couch. He'd wanted to tell himself that it was just a coincidence, that she'd been reading and had accidentally fallen asleep. But after the way she'd pulled away from him the night before...

What had he done? That question had haunted him for three days now, leaving him tossing and turning for hours. If it hadn't been for Dreamless Sleep, he wouldn't have gotten any rest at all, and even then, he'd been existing in a constant state of exhaustion. He'd spent most of his waking hours analyzing his behavior toward her — all the things he'd said and done, anything that might have offered even the slightest clue to explain her withdrawal. But it wasn't until she'd mentioned the cat that it hit him, an awful, sinking realization he had no idea how to deal with.



It was the cat. Yes, it had to be. Charity had seen something, heard something, had taken it upon herself to share that information with Lily. What was it? Not the truth about Potter, surely... he was certain that Lily would've reacted to that bombshell with devastated outrage, not cool silences and repeated assurances that she was fine.

So what was it then? And how much longer was she planning on shutting him out?

Shoving the unanswered letters in a drawer, he heaved himself to his feet, nodding at the portraits as he slipped behind the tapestry.

"Lily?" he called, not expecting a response.

"In the study."

His heart lurched. Was it wishful thinking, or did she sound warmer than she had that morning?

Taking a deep breath, he made his way toward the study, pausing to remove his outer robes before opening the door. And there she was — sitting on the couch with her hands folded in her lap, looking up at him with wide, expectant eyes.

"Can we talk?"

"Of course." Swallowing hard, he headed for an empty chair.

"You can sit next to me," she said softly.

Well, that was a good start, though he still felt anxious as he settled himself beside her. What if this had nothing to do with Charity? What if Lily was about to tell him she'd made a mistake, that she didn't love him after all? That she'd only turned to him out of loneliness, or...

"First," she said, interrupting his thoughts, "I wanted to apologize for the way I've been acting. I didn't mean to shut you out."

"You don't have to apologize," he said, rather more gruffly than he'd intended.

"Yes, I do. It wasn't fair. I... I don't know how to explain it, but I have to try. This can't continue."

He avoided her eyes, gazing up at the darkened window. "Do you not want to be with me? If that's the case, you can just say so. I won't be angry."

"What?! No!"

"I wouldn't turn you out, you know."

"Severus, look at me. Please."

Unable to resist the pleading in her voice, he turned to face her, alarmed to see that her eyes had filled with tears.

"I love you," she said, reaching out to touch his hand. "Don't you believe me?"

"Of course." He paused, swallowing past the lump that had risen in his throat. "But if you'd changed your mind... I only meant..."

“Can you change *your* mind about loving *me*?”

“No. But...”

“Don’t even try to tell me it’s different. It’s not. Anyway, will you let me get to the point?”

Relaxing, Severus leaned back, resting his head against the couch. She loved him. Still wanted to be with him. As long as that was the case, whatever else she had to say couldn’t be so bad... could it?

“Severus, I need to know what’s going on. I need to know the truth.”

Instantly, he was on his guard again, watching her through wary eyes. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged, though her hands were trembling. “About the war. About you. About what’s going on out there. I don’t know what to think, sitting here by myself all the time. And Charity...”

“What about Charity?” he said sharply. “What did she tell you?”

“She said you had some students in your office, and you...”

“So she spied on me,” he said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “As if I don’t have enough people watching my every move. Go on.”

“Severus...”

“Go on,” he snapped, glaring at the wall. “Tell me the rest.”

“No. Not if it’s going to upset you.”

He turned back to face her, staring at her intently. “What *upsets* me is you freezing me out, Lily. Whatever discussion we need to have to put an end to that? I’m all for it.”

“I told you I was sorry. I’m trying to...”

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” he said, making an effort to soften his tone. “I want to fix it. Now please... continue. Tell me what Charity said.”

“Just that she saw you being harsh with the students. That you used Legilimency on them. Why would you do that? I don’t understand.”

So *this* was why she’d been giving him the cold shoulder? Did she honestly think he would’ve done that if he’d had any choice in the matter? Or was she like everyone else, preferring to believe the worst of him instead of giving him the benefit of the doubt?

“No, you *don’t* understand,” he said savagely. “You have no idea...”

“And whose fault is that?!” she shot back, her eyes blazing.

“That you don’t trust me? That you just assume...”

“I don’t *assume* anything, Severus! And you... how dare you talk to me about *trust*? You, who won’t tell me anything, just leave me to sit here by myself, not knowing what the hell is going on! It’s my *son* who’s out there in danger, and I can’t...” She trailed off, choking on a sob. “I don’t... can’t even talk about it... can’t ask... you don’t tell me...”

“Lily, stop. Please.”

“Just trot off to your Death Eater meetings, while I can’t do anything except wait and worry, and... and... no idea what’s going on... no way of knowing if you’re ever coming back, or...”

The rest of her words were lost, her shoulders shaking as she buried her face in her hands. Severus had no idea what to say, what to do, acting on instinct as he reached out and pulled her into his lap. She made no move to resist, pressing her face against his neck as she soaked his collar with her tears.

“Lily, don’t...”

But then he silenced himself, realizing this wasn’t a bad thing, that it might even be what she needed. After all, the subtext behind her words wasn’t hard to understand. She’d been keeping all of this inside for far too long, though he couldn’t begin to imagine why. Did she honestly think she couldn’t talk to him about her fears, that she was supposed to pretend that everything was fine?

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath. “I’m an idiot.”

Why *wouldn’t* she feel like that with the way he’d been behaving? Hiding his worries. Acting like everything was all right. Avoiding talk of the war at all costs. And why had he done that? Because he’d wanted to keep her happy, hadn’t wanted to burden her with unpleasant things. Clearly, she’d had similar motivations for keeping her mouth shut, had taken her cues from him.

Of course, it wasn’t so bad on his part. He was used to concealing his feelings, even preferred it that way in most situations. But Lily? She wasn’t like that, had always needed to vent her frustrations to find any relief. To think of her sitting here tormented by anxiety, yet putting on a brave face for his sake? That was... well, it was intolerable.

He should’ve known. The way she hardly ever mentioned the boy, rarely asked about the war. Had he been stupid enough to believe she wasn’t concerned? Well, no. But he’d been content to ignore it as long as she had, relieved that she’d made it so easy for him to avoid the subject.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“What?” She sniffled, lifting her head to gaze at him with red rimmed eyes.

“For not telling you more. I thought I was protecting you, I...”

“Me too.”

“I know.” He reached up, brushing away the damp strands of hair that clung to her cheek. And then he knew what he needed to do. Granted, it would be beyond difficult. Every fiber of his being would rebel against it. But for her sake, he had to open himself up, had to tell her whatever it was she wanted to know.

“All right,” he said, meeting her eyes without flinching. “Ask me.”

She frowned. “What?”

“Ask me about the students. The Legilimency. I suppose that’s a good place to start.”

“Severus, you really don’t have to...”

“Yes,” he said, his voice firm. “I do.”

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Now that Lily had an opening, she didn’t know what to say. Part of her wished she hadn’t even mentioned it, that she could’ve gone on pretending that everything was okay. But deep down, she knew that would’ve been the worst thing she could’ve done. Sooner or later, she would’ve pushed him away, continuing to do so until there was no hope of bridging the gulf between them.

No, they needed to have this conversation, as painful as it might be. Not only for her sake, but for his as well. How could he ever believe she truly loved him if he insisted on hiding all the unpleasant parts? And how could she help but doubt him when she had no explanation for his actions?

“Tell me about the Legilimency,” she said gently. “Make me understand.”

He glanced away, letting out a shuddering sigh. “I didn’t want to do it, I... didn’t have a choice, really. The Dark Lord demanded harsher punishments, he won’t be satisfied with...”

“But how would he find out? You were alone with the children, weren’t you? Couldn’t you have just told him what he wanted to hear and left it at that?”

“You really don’t know, do you?”

His tone wasn’t harsh. No, it was stunned, as if he was finally coming to realize how much he’d concealed from her. And then he muttered something under his breath, springing to his feet and hurrying from the room without a backward glance.

“Shit,” she whispered, flinching as the door slammed shut.

But then she heard it open again, sighing in relief as he appeared on the threshold. He had something in his arms, a round object covered with a satin cloth. She watched him curiously as he strode forward, setting it on the table before pulling the cloth away.

“This,” he said, gesturing at the Pensieve, “is the best explanation I can give you.”

“You don’t have to... we can just talk...”

He ignored her, his brow furrowed in concentration as he lifted his wand to his temple. One after another, he extracted his memories, silvery blue strands floating down into the basin.

“Understand,” he said as soon as he was finished, “There are some things I cannot — *will not* — show you. As such, some memories will seem disjointed, appearing to have no logical order. But I hope this helps you understand my position... why I do the things I do.”

“Of course,” she said softly. “Severus, are you *sure* about this? If you’d rather just tell me, I’ll believe you. I swear I will.”

He shook his head. “It’ll be easier this way.”

“And you want me to do it now?”

“Yes, Lily.” His lips twitched, though a peculiar light flickered behind his eyes. Something vulnerable, frightened, yet almost resigned. And then she realized that this was his moment of truth, that he really believed the things she was about to see would change everything.

And for all she knew, he might be right.

“Okay.” She sucked in a deep breath, plunging her face into the Pensieve.

## 51. Secrets of the Pensieve

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### Chapter 51: Secrets of the Pensieve

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The first memory came as no surprise. It was the scene that had taken place in Severus's office a few days before, only this time, Lily wasn't watching through a crack in the wall. She was standing right beside him, seeing it through his eyes instead of her own.

"*Legilimens!*" he snapped, but she could feel his reluctance, underscored by bitter self-loathing. And then she was sucked into the girl's mind along with him, sensing the gentleness of his touch, noticing the way he shied away from any thoughts that were too personal.

She saw Ginny Weasley eating dinner with her family, laughing with friends as she walked down the halls. Harry made several appearances, smiling at the girl as he threaded his fingers through hers. There was the briefest glimpse of a bedroom, Harry's lips pressed against a naked shoulder, but it was gone in a flash, replaced by an image of Ginny flying through the air at Quidditch practice.

And then abruptly, Severus withdrew, leaving Lily disoriented as she was thrust back into his office.

The rest of the memory was unfamiliar — she'd fled back to their quarters by then, hadn't seen what had happened after Severus's examination. Now she watched him curiously as he lifted his wand, cringing as the girl cried out in fear. But the spells he cast were harmless, a shower of brilliant sparks shooting off in all directions even as his lips twisted into the most menacing snarl she'd ever seen.

Finally, he moved closer, wand mere inches from Ginny's face as he muttered, "*Confundo.*"

His voice lost any hint of malice as he told the girl to forget what had happened, commanding her to act with caution so she wouldn't be caught again. That alone spoke volumes about his true allegiance... he wasn't trying to break Ginny's spirit. He *wanted* her to fight back, was simply trying to prevent her from suffering as a result of doing so.

Quietly, Lily watched Ginny leave, her attention shifting as the pretty blonde girl named Luna took her place. Luna didn't seem frightened at all, smiling serenely at Severus just before he invaded her mind. Again, he took his time, focusing on harmless memories of the girl bounding through the woods, on the hunt for some magical creature Lily couldn't recall ever reading about in her textbooks.

Following that, Severus began to cast his spells again, while Luna observed him with an expression that could only be described as smug.

"*I knew you wouldn't hurt me, Professor.*"

Severus paused, his surprised expression nearly breaking Lily's heart.

*"I'm your headmaster," he said gruffly, lifting his wand again. "Not your professor. Confundo!"*

The final student was a boy Lily remembered all too well. Neville Longbottom. Rather than looking frightened as Ginny had or strangely unruffled like Luna, he was openly defiant, refusing to sit until Severus lifted his wand, plopping him down in a chair.

*"Do not force me to restrain you, Mr. Longbottom."*

*"If you think I'm just going to let you..."*

*"I'm afraid you have no say in the matter."*

Withdrawing his wand, Neville rose to his feet, meeting Severus stare for stare.

*"A second wand? Nice try, Mr. Longbottom. Now hand it over, or I'll have to take it from you by force."*

*"Expel..."*

*"Don't be foolish, boy. Do you really think your pathetic attempts..."*

*"Expelliarmus!"*

Neville was the one who shouted the spell, but somehow, Severus was left holding both wands. He smirked, tucking one in his pocket before pointing the other directly at the boy. Neville dropped back into his chair, thin, snake like ropes coiling around his arms and legs. It was a harsh thing to witness, but under the circumstances, Lily could hardly blame Severus. His frustration was almost palpable, an undercurrent of regret striking her forcefully even as he managed to keep up the act.

*"You should be punished for that," he said, his lip curling in a derisive sneer. "Later, perhaps. For now..."*

*"Greasy bastard. If Dumbledore was here..."*

*"Silencio!"*

Severus was fuming now, pacing around the boy's chair in restless circles as if trying to bring himself under control. But when he stopped, muttering the incantation as he entered Neville's mind, his touch was as gentle as it had been with the girls.

Ten minutes later, he was alone, slumped over at his desk with his head buried in his hands. The memory took her directly into his mind then, leaving her to watch in horror as one by one, he manipulated the events she'd just witnessed. His careful examinations were transformed into brutal invasions, leaving the children whimpering on the floor in the aftermath. Harmless spells became nasty hexes, woven seamlessly with agonized screams he plucked from memories that remained closed off to her.

When he lifted his head again, he released a shaky breath, his expression grim but satisfied.

And then the memory shifted, leaving them standing outside a wrought iron gate, as elegant as the huge, stately house that loomed in the distance. Malfoy Manor. Her stomach twisted in knots as she realized she was about to attend her first Death Eater meeting.

But then Severus hesitated, followed by a swirl of darkness as she felt him drawing her into his mind again. And then she could see nothing but herself, deeply intimate flashes of the two of them making love, feelings of tenderness and joy at war with growing frustration as he struggled to push the images away. He couldn't do it. His heart was beating faster now, breath coming in short, panicked bursts. Pacing back and forth, he muttered a string of curses, only coming to a standstill when his thoughts shifted directions. Something about Occlumency, a last, desperate attempt to redirect his thoughts.

Before she realized what was happening, he began to erase her from his mind, dozens of memories replaced by feelings of bitter remorse, a deep, gut wrenching isolation that nearly brought her to her knees. But then just as quickly, it was over, the scene skipping forward to show him striding into the drawing room.

She felt no emotion from him now, only steady resolve as he greeted the monster who was seated at the head of the table.

Voldemort. Lily tried to tell herself that this was only a memory, that he had no power to hurt her here. But still, she shrank away, finding him even more grotesque than she had all those years ago in Godric's Hollow. His crimson eyes gleamed in the dim light, staring at Severus so intently it seemed as if they'd pierce him right through.

But if this made Severus uncomfortable, he showed no sign of it, murmuring an apology as he dipped his head in a respectful bow.

*"Approach me."*

Lily wasn't prepared for the invasion, crying out in shock as Severus brought her into his mind in the very same moment that Voldemort entered. It didn't hurt, but she could feel *his* pain, a hot, searing sensation that made him grit his teeth as his every thought was scrutinized, a brutal probing that didn't offer a second of relief. And then finally, Voldemort withdrew.

How could Severus be so stoic? How could he stand there like it was no big deal when his mind had just been... well, *raped*? That was the only word she could think of to describe what had just happened, an awful violation no person should ever have to endure.

She tried not to cry as Voldemort criticized Severus for being too merciful with the students, terrified that his displeasure was about to end in a horrible punishment. Of course, common sense should've told her that wasn't going to happen, that Severus had been fine when he'd returned to her that night. But fear was an irrational thing, tempting her to cast herself between them before she realized that Severus had found a way to redeem himself.

*"Where's the Muggle?"* Voldemort demanded, admiring the weapon he'd just been given.

Abruptly, the memory was snatched away, dissolving into a swirl of blackness. And then she was back in the drawing room, feeling sick as she realized what must've happened. There was no Muggle in sight, only a large stain on the carpet as Bellatrix Lestrange left the room carrying a bloodied sword.

*"Now then, shall we revisit your earlier complaints?"*

That was directed at the Carrows, who proceeded to whine about Severus interfering with their punishments. She felt tears rolling down her cheeks when she realized what was



happening, afraid Severus was fighting a losing battle as he spoke on behalf of the students. It was a huge risk with little chance of success, but still, he took it, arguing his point so eloquently that even Voldemort seemed to agree.

But in the end, it was only the smallest triumph. Severus had retained the power to spare a few students here and there, but that was to be the exception, not the rule. Voldemort made it clear that he expected Severus to show a lot more brutality, and to make matters worse, the Carrows had been given a free hand. And that explained... well, *everything*.

"Very well," she heard as the memory faded. "*The three of you may go.*"

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Severus watched nervously as Lily lifted her head from the Pensieve, turning to him with a stricken expression. He'd shown her too much, hadn't he? Damn it.

"Sit down," he said quietly, retrieving his memories and placing them back in his head.

She obeyed without question, dropping onto the couch with a soft thud.

"Shall I make you some tea?"

He didn't wait for her to respond, desperate for something useful to do. Retrieving the teapot, he used his wand to fill it with water, tapping on the side and then setting it back down as he waited for it to boil.

"Does he always do that?" she said after a moment, twisting her hands in her lap. "The Legilimency?"

"Yes."

"And is it always that bad?"

He sighed, seeing no point in lying to her. "Sometimes worse."

"Oh, Severus..."

"It's fine, Lily. As I'm sure you noticed, I'm perfectly capable of handling it."

"That's not the point."

"And what," he said, placing a teacup in her hands, "is the point?"

"You shouldn't have to go through that. I wish there was a way..."

"Do you want to win this war? See the Dark Lord defeated?"

"Of course," she said, her voice quiet but fierce. "You know I want that more than anything."

"As do I. But to make that happen, sacrifices must be made. There are things I must do..."

"Like what happened in your office," she interrupted. "You did that to the students because you had to have something to show him?"

He nodded, taking a seat beside her. "I might be a skilled Occlumens, but even I can't spin memories out of thin air. They have to have *some* basis in truth."

“Well, that explains a lot.”

“Meaning?”

She hesitated, taking a sip of tea before setting her cup on the table. “The way you are with people. That’s part of it, yes? If you can show him that you’re cold, standoffish, sometimes harsh, it must be easier to make him believe you’re on his side.”

“To a point, yes. But I’d be lying if I said it was all an act. Dealing with people has never been my strong point, Lily. You of all people should know that. And children in particular...”

“What about Harry?”

“What about him?” he responded, shifting uncomfortably.

“The way you’ve treated him all these years. How much of that had to do with all of this? I mean, would you have been so hard on him if You-Know-Who hadn’t been a factor?”

“No,” he said, relieved that at least in some ways, he was telling the truth. “If the stakes hadn’t been so high, it might’ve been easier to overlook his reckless behavior. Mind you, I’m not saying I would’ve counted him among my favorite students, but...”

“Severus?”

“Hmmm?”

“What’s going to happen?”

Sighing, he rested his head against the couch. “That, I don’t know. At the moment, it appears the boy is still trying to locate the Horcruxes. I don’t know where he is, but the fortunate thing is that no one else does either. For once, it seems he’s being extremely cautious, which is a good sign. I’d say there’s a fair chance he’ll be able to avoid confronting the Dark Lord until he’s ready to do so.”

“I still don’t understand why it has to be him. Why can’t the Order, or... hell, just put a wand in my hand. I’ll do it myself.”

He gave her a sharp look, his blood going cold. “You’ll do no such thing.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’d kill you, Lily.”

“But if it meant protecting Harry...”

“No.”

“It worked before.”

“This is an entirely different situation.”

“I don’t see how.”

“The boy has to be the one to do it, because...” He trailed off, the words choking in his throat. This was the time to tell her. How much longer could he wait? “Because he...”

He couldn't say it. Not with her looking at him like that, her eyes already damp with tears. How could he kill the hope she clung to with such fierce desperation, only to replace it with an incomprehensible amount of sorrow? How could he be sure it wouldn't destroy her, drive her to do something reckless, or...

"Severus?"

"You've already given him your protection," he said quietly. "As it stands now, he's better equipped than any of us to face the Dark Lord. Because of you. Because of the sacrifice you made. And... well, there are other factors, too. The link between their minds, a connection that gives him a power the rest of us will never have. He... he's our best chance, Lily. We have no choice but to accept it."

"What if I can't?" she whispered, staring down at her hands.

How could he respond, when she'd just put voice to his deepest fear?

"I need you to try," he said, the words sounding more strained than he'd intended. "I need you to... have faith."

"Faith in Harry?"

"Well, yes, but also in me. I'm doing my best, Lily, I..."

"I know." She sniffled, flashing him a watery smile. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't... you're already doing so much, and I... it's not fair."

"Not fair to worry about your own son? What kind of foolishness..."

"No! I mean, of course I'm going to worry about Harry. I just feel bad about burdening you with it."

"Ah, I see," he said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "Because shutting me out is a far more sensible approach. Brooding silently, making both of us miserable in the process. Yes, I can definitely see..."

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Will you shut up?"

He smirked. "Yes, dear."

"Ass."

But then she did something that surprised him, kissing him gently before resting her head on his shoulder. That did wonders to improve his mood, his arm sliding around her and holding her close as he waited patiently for her to continue.

"I'm not saying I should keep it to myself. Obviously, that was a mistake. But you know, it's not easy to talk to you about these things."

"Why not? I deal with the realities of war every day, Lily. Do you really think I can't handle having a conversation about it? That anything you could say could be even half as bad as what I have to take from the Dark Lord, or Dumbledore, or..."

"It isn't just that," she said softly.

"Well, what is it then?"

"Harry."

"Ah." He should've known. "Care to elaborate?"

"I just... it isn't that... well, I'm just not sure how to deal with... damn it."

"Whatever it is, just tell me. I can take it."

She lifted her head, giving him a frustrated look. "I'm trying. Can't you see that?"

"Lily..."

She ignored him, leaning forward to retrieve her wand from the table. He watched in silence as she brought it to her temple, his eyes widening as a handful of silvery strands floated down into the basin.

"Take a look," she said when she was finished, gesturing at the Pensieve.

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Immediately, he understood why she'd found it so difficult to explain herself, plunging headfirst into a tangle of conflicted emotions unlike anything he'd ever seen. She'd taken him all the way back to the beginning, an image of her lying in an unfamiliar bed with a newborn child cradled against her breast. Face pale, body trembling with exhaustion, but such exquisite joy in her expression that he felt a lump in his throat.

A sudden shift and the child was a few months old, chubby little fists attempting to capture the colorful sparks that shot out from Lily's wand. Laughing, identical green eyes dancing with delight... the memory faded, replaced by a quick succession of significant moments. Severus saw the baby learning to crawl, then teetering dangerously as he took his first steps. Lily rocking him to sleep, and then leaning over his crib on a different day, her voice breathless with excitement.

*"Say it again, Harry. Say it!"*

*"Lil... Lil..."*

*"You can do it!"*

*"Lily."*

She scooped him up then, her eyes shining with pride as she kissed the top of his head. *"You're supposed to call me 'Mum', you know."*

*"Lilllly!"*

*"All right, darling. If you insist."*

There was no sign of James in these memories, and gradually, Severus began to understand why. It wasn't only that Lily had wanted to spare him the sight of his former nemesis. She was trying to show him that her relationship with the boy was something completely separate, that this was a bond only the two of them had shared. Foolish, perhaps, but he'd always

assumed that love for the child ran in direct relation to love for the father. That theory had certainly explained his own mother's neglect. But if that wasn't the case...

Before he could dwell on that concept, he was plunged into another memory, blood turning to ice as he looked up to see a shadow looming on the wall...

*"Not Harry, please no! Take me! Kill me instead!"*

He'd suffered through memories of that night countless times, had imagined the rest in a hundred torturous ways. But he'd never seen it through her eyes, dumbfounded by her courage as she refused to cower in the face of death. Not a trace of fear for herself, only for her child...

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

The memory ended abruptly, sparing him from having to witness the rest. He didn't feel the pain she'd suffered when the curse had hit her, didn't have to watch himself weeping over her broken body. That was a blessing, though he was still shaken by what he'd seen, struggling for composure as the next memory came into focus.

He was in a cupboard, staring down at a baby in a makeshift cradle. The boy slept peacefully, jagged scar standing out in sharp relief on his forehead, thumb tucked into his mouth. And then the blanket began to stir, a tiny rodent poking its head out to nuzzle a chubby cheek. Without thinking, he attempted to swat it away, feeling like a fool as his hand dropped to his side.

And then it hit him, the realization that this was *Lily* as he felt the onslaught of emotion that seemed to radiate from the creature. Fear, bewilderment, despair, followed by quiet determination. She pulled him deeper into her mind then, keeping him there as the scenes flew past, a harsh picture of what life had been like in the Dursley household. He saw himself showing up on the doorstep, intimidating Petunia with numerous threats, felt the rush of gratitude that had been Lily's reaction.

But in the end, it had accomplished little. The boy had still suffered through years of cruelty and neglect, all while Lily was forced to watch in helpless frustration. Of course, Severus already knew that Potter's childhood hadn't been ideal, but to see it through *her* eyes, not twisted or minimized by his own biased perceptions...

"Fuck," he muttered, staring down at the boy as he wept quietly into his pillow. He'd taken a beating from his cousin that day, blamed for the incident before he was sent to bed without supper. As if he could afford to miss a meal, skinny limbs protruding from the ill fitting clothes he wore. It wasn't so different than...

An image of himself as a child appeared in Severus's mind, but only briefly as he was snatched into another memory. Hogwarts... a quick jaunt through the halls, followed by a classroom he remembered all too well.

*"Harry Potter. Our new celebrity."*

She'd been there? Shit.

*"Potter! What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"*

A ridiculous question for a first year. He'd known it even at the time, but had he cared? No, but *she* had... he could feel her bewilderment, her irritation, her futile hope that he'd ease up on the boy.

*"I don't know, sir."*

The words were quiet, humble, though this was the first time he'd heard them spoken that way. Where was the hint of arrogance that had been so obvious in that moment, the impression that the boy had been mocking him?

He wasn't given much time to wonder about that, as the next six years played out in quick succession. Back and forth, back and forth... either Lily was seething, wounded by his harsh dealings with the boy, or she was overcome with shame. And then abruptly, he was jerked forward, given a brief, tantalizing glimpse of her lying naked in the tub before she pulled him deeper into his mind, as deep as he could go. Her every thought was laid bare to him now, exposing her worries, her fears, all of which revolved around Harry.

Harry... and himself.

How could she criticize him when he'd done so much to protect her son? That thought dominated her consciousness, clearly an internal battle she'd been waging for quite some time. He felt her confusion, her unresolved anger, crushed by a wave of remorse as she pictured him pacing the halls at night, or bursting into the Shrieking Shack, or... naked and bleeding on a hillside? Fuck, what had Charity told her? Foolish woman.

So *this* was why she couldn't talk to him? Because she believed she had no right to question his actions? What kind of nonsense was that?

But that wasn't the end of it. Not even close. There were her own insecurities, too, the conviction that she'd failed as a mother somehow. As if throwing herself in front of the Killing Curse hadn't been enough? Apparently not. She was terrified that the boy would hate her, that she could never live up to his expectations. Afraid he'd *reject* her... what the hell?

And then abruptly, the scene shifted. Severus saw flashes of lovemaking, followed by Lily kissing him goodbye on the night he'd been summoned. He felt a rush of tenderness, of heady anticipation, at war with an onslaught of doubt as she began to question herself. Could Harry ever forgive her for falling in love with the man he'd despised for so many years? Would he ever understand? Could he and Severus learn to accept one another, or would she be forced to choose between them?

*"Shit."*

How could he have been such an idiot? Refusing to think about the future, determined to focus on the present? That made sense for *him*... no need to concern himself over the boy's reaction when they'd both be dead soon enough. But Lily? He'd given her no reason to believe his days were numbered, and he certainly hadn't informed her of her son's dismal fate. Of course she'd be worried, fretting over the very things he'd chosen to ignore.

And what reassurance had he'd given her? None.

Granted, he could put an end to it right now. He could tell her the truth, or pluck it from his head and drop it in the Pensieve if he couldn't say the words. Let her see that there was no need to worry about the future, that all they could do was make the most of the time they had

left. But if he did that, he'd crush her, casting a dark cloud over all the days to come. And what was the point in telling her now, really? Wouldn't it be better to spare her that grief until there was no other option?

Besides, he didn't *want* to think about dying. And why should he have to when he already knew what the final outcome would be? Either he'd reveal his true allegiance and the Dark Lord would kill him, or he'd find a way to get a message to the boy with his cover intact. Regardless, he'd be a prime target to one side or the other, a traitorous bastard to be struck down on sight.

If that was the way it had to be, fine. He'd be ready when the time came, would do his best to die with dignity and all that nonsense. But couldn't he forget about the bloody war for a little while? Couldn't he fool himself into believing he had a future with Lily, even if it was a future he was never destined to see?

Well, maybe not. But he was damn sure going to try.

"Clearly," he said, lifting his head from the Pensieve. "We have a lot to talk about."

## 52. Night of Revelations

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### Chapter 52: Night of Revelations

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Lily stared at Severus in silence, not knowing what to say. She knew she'd shown him too much, that it was far too soon to deal with all these issues. And yet what choice did she have? She couldn't keep pretending everything was fine, when deep down, she was terrified that loving him might damage the relationship she hoped to have with her son.

"Please stop looking at me like that."

"What?" She blinked, frowning up at him as he paced back and forth. "What do you mean?"

He paused, scrutinizing her features. "Like you're afraid of me."

"Severus! Of course I'm not..." But that wasn't true, was it? Not when she was watching him through wary eyes, dreading what he might say. What if he couldn't be reconciled with Harry, if the wounds of the past could never be healed? No, she wasn't scared of *him*... not in the way he probably meant it. But to realize that everything hinged on his reaction, that she might be forced to make one of the most painful decisions of her life based on what he said? Yes, that was frightening.

"Call me a bastard."

"What?!"

Severus stopped in his tracks, coming to kneel in front of her. "You heard me," he said, his words slow and deliberate. "*Call me a bastard.*"

"Why?"

"Because you're angry. Because you're hurt. Because the way I treated your son bloody *infuriates* you."

"Severus," she said gently, reaching out to touch his face. "After everything you've done for him... what you're *still* doing..."

"No," he interrupted, pushing her hand away. "Don't give me that shit. You think one cancels out the other? It doesn't, Lily. Stop pretending..."

"Okay, fine. You were a bastard. Satisfied?"

"Not even close," he said, smirking up at her. "Tell me how you *really* feel."

"Damn it, Severus. It's over. Can't we just let it go?"

"No, because you haven't."



"Maybe not." She turned her head to look out the window, letting out a heavy sigh. "But I'm working on it. If you just give me time..."

"Fuck time. I want the truth."

"You want me to yell at you? Blame you for what you did, say awful things?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because," he said, his expression becoming more serious. "It needs to be said."

"I don't want to hurt you. After seeing how much you've suffered, everything you've done..." She trailed off, shaking her head when he started to interrupt. "No, don't tell me it doesn't matter. It does to me. Besides, I don't trust myself to..."

"You're afraid of losing your temper. Afraid you won't be able to restrain yourself? That's it, isn't it? You *know* how much anger you're suppressing. So much that it scares you. Better to keep it hidden than risk the damage it might cause if you opened the floodgates."

She stared down at him, stunned. "How do you know that?"

He chuckled, though there was no humor behind it. "I've spent my whole life learning how to control my emotions. Indeed, you might say the fate of the Wizarding world depends on my ability to do so. Is it really surprising to think I might notice when others are doing the same? You're Occluding, Lily."

"What? That's absurd. I never learned how to..."

"Doesn't matter. Occlumency isn't a skill that can be taught. And yet we all possess the ability to some degree."

"But Dumbledore asked you to teach Harry..."

"Yes," Severus said, sinking back on his heels. "But not for the reasons you think. Didn't you find it strange that Dumbledore chose *me* for the job? Why choose the man your son was least likely to trust?"

Lily nodded. "I didn't understand that at all. Why not just do it himself? He had to know Harry wasn't going to listen to you."

"Well, there's your answer. For Occlumency to work, one must have something to shield themselves against. A reason to fight back. If Dumbledore had entered the boy's mind, it would've hardly felt like a threat. But me?"

"So you weren't there to teach him. You were supposed to *antagonize* him."

"Precisely," he said. "The boy would've wanted to conceal his thoughts from me, obviously, but I also had a unique talent for triggering his temper. He couldn't learn how to do the former until he figured out how to control the latter. Unfortunately, that never happened. Unlike his mother, his discipline was rather lacking."

"He was 15 years old, Severus," Lily said, not bothering to hide her irritation. "What do you expect?"

“Young, perhaps, but certainly old enough to...”

“Do you remember what *I* was like at 15? Same temper, same stubbornness... isn't it obvious where he got that from?”

Severus shifted uncomfortably, avoiding her eyes. “That isn't necessarily true. His father...”

“Sirius was the one with the temper. Not James. The rare occasions I *did* see James get angry, he was over it in five minutes. Rolled right off his back. But me? Do I need to remind you of all those times I yelled at you? Stormed off in a huff or refused to speak to you for days?”

“But you *did* learn to control yourself,” he pointed out. “Which proves you're capable of doing so. If what you say is true and the boy inherited *your* temper, one would think he could've managed to do the same.”

Lily sighed, leaning her head against the couch. “Do you know *how* I learned to do that? Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Because I had no outlet. Sixteen years of silence, unable to yell or cry or even speak... I didn't have to worry about hiding my emotions from anyone else. But from myself? That was a different story. If I'd had to live with those feelings, unable to do a thing about them, I would've lost my mind. The only thing I could do was bury them, push them away until I could barely feel them at all. And now...”

“Now you can let them out,” he said quietly. “You *need* to let them out.”

“I don't know how.”

She felt her eyes filling with tears, reaching up to swipe them away. Finally, she was beginning to understand the real problem, realizing it was much more complicated than guilt or not wanting to hurt his feelings. Getting angry hadn't been an option for so long that the truth was, she didn't know how to give voice to those feelings anymore. Not the visceral, self righteous anger she felt brewing just beneath the surface, big enough to choke her after culminating for so many years.

“Of course you don't. I should've realized, I...” Severus trailed off, raking a hand through his hair. “The books always say that one shouldn't Occlude for too long without lowering their shields. Even a few days is pushing it. So if you've been doing it for *years*... fuck, Lily. Well, you were right about one thing.”

“What's that?”

“Fearing that you wouldn't be able to control your temper if you unleashed it. If you lowered all those barriers at once, it would be a terrible thing to behold. Indeed, you might kill me on the spot.”

“Severus! I would *never*...”

“Tell me,” he said, his voice grave. “If you were brewing Draught of Living Death and added the juice from one Sopophorous Bean, what would happen?”

"I'd stir seven times anticlockwise."

"And then you'd have a finished potion. Very good. Now what would happen if you added the juice from six Sopophorous Beans?"

"Well, the cauldron would explode." Lily frowned, trying to remember. "And... noxious fumes?"

"Indeed. Do you see my point? Too much of anything is toxic. We can't hope to control it. Which is why it's crucial to add anything in increments, never all at once."

"So these... feelings. You're saying I have to let them out a little at a time?"

"Exactly." He nodded, looking satisfied.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Well," he said, withdrawing his wand from his sleeve. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you."

"Then I think I know a way."

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Severus sucked in a deep breath, hoping like hell he was doing the right thing. It certainly wasn't the first time he'd modified memories, either his own or someone else's. But there was a fine line between allowing Lily to unleash her anger and making her hate him. Too much emotion at once could be devastating... he had to take this at a pace they both could handle, making sure one issue was fully resolved before moving on to the next.

"Replace your memories," he said quietly, gesturing at the Pensieve.

Without a word, she did as he'd asked, lifting the silvery strands and bringing them to her temple.

"Now," he said, glancing at the empty basin. "Is there anything you *don't* want me to see? I'd suggest you go ahead and remove it. I'll do my best to respect your privacy, but I can't guarantee I won't stumble across something by accident."

"All right," she murmured, frowning in concentration as she touched the wand to her temple once more.

He watched, nonplussed, as the basin began to fill. Did she really have so many secrets? Why the need to hide so much?

But then he remembered their falling out, her years of friendship with the Marauders, followed by her marriage to Potter. Of course there were plenty of things she'd want to conceal from him... indeed, he should be grateful that she was doing such a thorough job of it.

"I think I'm done. No, wait..."

She dropped one more memory into the Pensieve before sinking back onto the couch, giving him a wary look.

"Is this going to hurt?"

"Physically? No. Emotionally? I can't say it's going to be easy."

"I understand," she said quietly, folding her hands in her lap. "Well, whatever you need to do..."

Severus moved to the couch, hesitating before he lifted his wand. "Lily?"

"Hmmm?"

"Before we get started, will you do something for me?"

"What's that?"

He paused, taking a deep breath. "Kiss me."

"Kiss you?" she echoed, looking bewildered. "Of course, but... oh, Severus, no... you don't actually think..."

Damn the woman. She knew him too well.

"That I might lose you? Perhaps, though at the very least, I expect you'll be angry for a while."

"I wish you had more faith in me," she said, her voice so sad it brought a lump to his throat.

"I do, Lily. But..."

He trailed off as she took his face between her hands, looking deep in his eyes before her own fluttered closed. Her mouth brushed his, gentle, almost tentative, only a whisper of a touch. But then her lips parted, a soft little tongue demanding entrance. That was granted without hesitation, his mouth opening beneath hers as she kissed him harder, her tongue delving deeper, a ferocity that took him by surprise as she pressed herself against him.

"Wait," he gasped, panting hard as he broke away. "We can't..."

"I'm sorry," she said, though she hardly looked apologetic. *Smug* was more like it, all flushed cheeks and mischievous eyes. Bloody hell, he wanted to...

"Don't be sorry. It's just..."

"Not the right time?"

He nodded, putting a little more distance between them.

"Well, maybe later then," she said with a smile.

God, he hoped so.

"All right," he said, focusing on his breathing until he felt more composed. And then he lifted his wand, giving her a searching look. "Ready?"

"Yes."

"*Legilimens.*"

It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. The boy's arrival at Hogwarts, that unfortunate incident on the first day of Potions. The memory was harsher this time, hitting him full force as he penetrated the careful shields that had softened it somewhat. Pure, unadulterated fury, Lily positively seething as she wondered what the hell his problem was. Why would he go out of his way to humiliate her son? What could Harry have possibly done to deserve such treatment?

Maybe he should've stopped there, but then he realized she'd chosen to remain behind when class was dismissed, that she'd been intent on solving the mystery. An odd vantage point... she'd been masquerading as a small insect, latching onto his boot as he'd headed up to Dumbledore's office.

*"What is it you find so distasteful about Harry?"*

*"Everything."*

*"Everything? From what I understand, the boy has been doing quite well in his other classes. I certainly haven't heard any complaints."*

*"He's..."*

Severus cringed, dreading the words to come. But then he remembered they'd been interrupted that night, whatever vile thing he'd been about to say cut short by a knock on the door. Minerva passing him, pointing out a spider on his shoe. Oh fuck, he knew where this was going... or at least, he thought he did. He saw himself trapping her in a vial, felt her growing fear as he'd carried her down to the dungeons. Into his quarters, where he'd proceeded to strip right in front of her.

Well, at least that wasn't *too* humiliating. What followed... wanking in the shower? He felt his face turn red, but even as it did, he began to feel her reactions rather than his own. She hadn't been repulsed by the sight. Far from it. Was that... was she *admiring* him? Interesting... he dwelled on that for a few minutes before realizing there were more important things to worry about.

Still, it was comforting to realize that even at this stage, there'd been positive emotions to balance the negative ones. He hadn't expected that, gentle compassion as she'd picked up on his loneliness, his frustration, thinking of him as "merciful" of all things when he'd removed the stopper from the vial to let her breathe. To him, that had simply been logical... no need to let the creature suffocate. But to her, it had been something much bigger, an incident she'd taken as proof that he'd still had a heart.

Feeling shaken, Severus shuffled to the next memory, a distressing image of Lily being swallowed by a toad. But then she *was* the toad... a toad who'd spent the rest of the year in Gryffindor Tower. She hadn't witnessed any of his other interactions with the boy, had merely overheard a few conversations here and there as the children had speculated over whether he was the one attempting to murder Potter.

Well, he was innocent of that charge, at least.

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Severus lowered his wand to find Lily glaring at him, green eyes blazing with fury.

"You..." she sputtered. "I can't *believe* you... he was just a child, and you... how could you treat him like that? You *humiliated* him!"

"I did."

"Why?"

He shrugged, tucking his wand in his sleeve. "Lots of reasons. The boy was just like his father, he..."

"He is *not* like James! Not in the way you're thinking. Did you ever see him bully anyone, Severus? Play cruel pranks just for the fun of it? Did he ever, even *once*..."

"Perhaps not," he said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "But his reckless behavior, the way he flouted the rules at every turn..."

"Oh no," she interrupted, shaking her head emphatically. "Don't even try that. We're talking about his first *day*. He'd done nothing wrong!"

Severus opened his mouth to defend himself, wanting to point out that the boy hadn't been paying attention, perhaps mention his arrogant demeanor. But after seeing the memory through her eyes, not once but twice now, he could no longer convince himself that his actions had been justified.

"Fine. I was wrong. But Lily..." He trailed off, letting out a heavy sigh. "You can't understand what I was like back then. Believing you were dead, that I was to blame? I hated myself. Hated everyone around me, too. The way that distorted my perception..."

"But why Harry? Why did he get the worst of it?"

"You still don't know?"

She tilted her head to one side, studying him for a long moment. "Well, some of it I can guess. I know he made things hard for you, and... well, there was James, and..."

"It wasn't just that. He..." The words caught in his throat, but he forced himself to continue, recognizing the importance of giving her the truth. "Yes, I saw his father in him. The physical resemblance alone... well, I shouldn't have to explain that one. Do you know what it's like to hate someone, Lily? Truly *hate* them? Everything that insufferable bastard did to me..."

"I know, Severus. But that wasn't Harry's fault."

"No," he agreed. "But how could I look at him without remembering all that? Years of torment, the loss of you, the horrible choices I made. And yet the worst part... that had nothing to do with the boy's father."

"What was it then?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes. Were it not for him, I couldn't help thinking you'd still be alive. As such, his very existence seemed like an insult. Then he started taking all those foolish risks, and it felt like

he was spitting on your memory, spitting on the most precious thing I'd ever known. Like he didn't care how much you'd sacrificed, nor how much others had suffered as a result of your death. I despised him for that, I couldn't..."

"Severus..."

"Yes, I saw his father. Every bloody time I looked at him. But more than that, I'd see you lying dead on that floor, and I couldn't help... I couldn't escape it, Lily. I swore to protect him for your sake, but..."

"If it caused you that much pain," she interrupted, her voice quiet. "Why not leave it to someone else?"

He let out a humorless chuckle. "Well, there's the irony. Yes, dealing with the boy was torture. But he was also my only hope of freeing myself from that torment, of finding any peace. I couldn't hope for your forgiveness, but I needed... I was trying to feel worthy of it, to redeem myself somehow. Maybe I've failed in that, but god, Lily, I've tried."

"You haven't failed," she murmured, sliding her hand over his. "I don't have to be Occluded to see how much you've done for him. No, I understand it even better now. You've suffered more than I ever realized, and you still... I can't help feeling like I'm the one who's unworthy of you."

"What? Don't be absurd."

"I'm not. To be that selfless, to love someone so much..."

"I do love you," he said quietly. "I always have. But don't fool yourself into thinking I'm a better person than I am. Yes, I've protected your son, but I also spent years hating him with every fiber of my being. I've said things, done things that you'll find unfair, harsh, even cruel. I can't take those things back, Lily."

"I know that. But what about the future, Severus? What about now?"

"Now?" He frowned.

"Could you learn not to hate him for my sake? Would you be willing to try?"

Severus sighed. "I already told you I don't hate him. Remember when you asked me, the night you forgave me for revealing the prophecy? I wasn't lying. Over the past couple years my feelings have... changed somewhat. Why? I don't know. I think it came down to realizing you were alive, which forced me to question a lot of things I'd come to believe as truth. Now? I'm willing to admit that I've been too hard on the boy at times. I can acknowledge my mistakes. It isn't easy, but..."

"I know." She threaded her fingers through his, giving them a gentle squeeze. "I also know that it wasn't all your fault. There've been plenty of times where he wasn't fair to you either. But as you said, there's no changing the past. I'm just worried what happens from here. How can I be with you if he's going to hate me for it?"

"Lily," Severus said, giving her a stern look. "He's not going to hate you. I'd never allow that."

"You might not have a choice."

“Oh, I believe I do.”

“How so?”

“Because I’ll do everything I can to make peace with him. Whatever it takes. I’ll apologize for every damn thing I’ve ever said to offend the boy, I’ll...” He trailed off, shifting uncomfortably as her lips curved into a joyful smile. Lies. All of it. He hated himself for inspiring such hopes, knowing they’d never come to pass. But were his intentions sincere? That was the real question. If his impending death hadn’t been a factor, would he still be willing to make these promises?

Yes. Absolutely. If it meant spending his future with Lily? It would’ve been a small price to pay. Besides, his feelings toward Potter *had* changed. Granted, he still couldn’t say he was *fond* of the boy, but many of his worst resentments were hardly a factor these days. Blaming him for Lily’s death? Lily was sitting right here beside him. Associating him with his father? Well, that was more complicated, but she *did* have a point... he wasn’t quite the bully his father had been. Still arrogant, perhaps, but Severus could’ve learned to tolerate that.

“Do you mean it?” Lily said, interrupting his thoughts.

“Of course I do. I’d be glad to put the past behind us.”

“Me too. I hope we can.”

“We will,” he said, lifting their joined hands to kiss her fingers.

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Lily knew it wasn’t over, that they still had five years of memories to sort through. But somehow, she also realized that the worst was behind them. The way Severus had acknowledged his mistakes, his willingness to make amends? That was the best possible outcome, so much more than she’d allowed herself to hope for. Everything else could be resolved with time.

“Are we all right?” he said after a moment, his voice subdued. “Perhaps it’s too soon to ask, but...”

In response, she slid her hands into his hair, drawing his head down to meet hers. She kissed him then, gentle but fierce, pulling back to stare deeply in his eyes. They were dark and hooded, relief giving way to the first flickers of desire as she started to unbutton his frock coat.

“Still the wrong time?” she murmured, caressing his growing erection through the fabric of his trousers. “If you want me to stop...”

He let out a shaky breath. “Certainly not.”

“Good.”

Moving to straddle him, she pushed the coat off his shoulders, fumbling with a row of smaller buttons until she managed to remove his shirt as well. He tossed them both aside, groaning softly as her hands slid across his bare chest, over his shoulders and up to his neck. Brushing his hair back, she touched her lips to his pale skin, trailing kisses along the side of



his throat. Only then did she understand his intention, his head falling back against the couch as he sighed in surrender. He was relinquishing control, content to let her have her way with him.

An intriguing thought, to say the least, though she hardly knew where to start. James had always been the one to take charge of their encounters, and after the first few times with Severus, she'd begun to assume he was the same way. But no... his demeanor was completely passive now, no movement whatsoever aside from the hands that stroked her back without a trace of urgency.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked him, feeling a little awkward.

"Whatever you wish. I'm all yours."

And then awkwardness melted into intense, heady arousal as she rocked her hips against his, her tongue tracing the contours of his ear as she whispered, "Mine?"

"God, Lily. Yes."

Smiling to herself, she found his lips again, her kisses slow and deep as she reached down to unfasten his trousers. His erection sprang free, prodding at her insistently through her layers of clothing, but she wasn't ready for that. Not yet. She slid off his lap instead, pulling his trousers off and tossing them aside. And then she rose to her feet, giving him a devilish look that made him growl in response as she reached for the hem of her nightgown.

She stood in front of him in nothing but her underwear, blushing faintly as he scrutinized her from head to toe. His breath was coming faster now, his eyes burning with unmistakable hunger as they fixed on her breasts. A flash of inspiration and she slid her hands up to caress them, moaning softly as she lifted and squeezed, thumbs dancing across her taut nipples.

"Fuck," he muttered, and for a second, she thought he was going to reach out and grab her. But he managed to restrain himself, fingers digging into his thighs instead.

Taking pity on him, she knelt as his feet, leaning forward to kiss his chest. She'd barely noticed that his erection had slid into the valley between her breasts, but then his hips began to move, quiet pants giving way to a shuddering groan as she brought her arms to her sides to give him more friction.

Well, this was something new. Definitely a trick she'd have to try again sometime, perhaps even see if she could finish him off that way. But for now, she had other ideas.

She pulled back, making him grunt at the loss of contact. But that was soon replaced by a sharp gasp as she ran her tongue along the length of his erection, lifting her eyes to meet his as she took him fully into her mouth. He let out a curse, harsh, almost guttural, in strange contrast to the hand that dropped down to stroke her hair. The taste of him was warm and masculine, arousing her beyond belief as she dipped her head, taking him as deep as she could manage. She set a slow, sensuous pace at first, until she began to feel his urgency, his harsh panting growing louder by the second as his head hit the back of the couch with a soft thud.

In response, she picked up speed, increasing the pressure of her mouth, his hands clenching in her hair almost painfully as his thighs started to tremble.

“Enough,” he rasped out, his voice hoarse and desperate. “I’m about to…”

Part of her wanted to tell him to go ahead, ready to assure him that her pleasure could wait. But he’d already withdrawn from her mouth, staring intently at her underwear as she rose to her feet.

She might be the one in control, but the command in his eyes was unmistakable, one she obeyed without question as she hurried to rid herself of the offending garment. And then she was on his lap again, kissing him fiercely, reaching down to make a quick adjustment before taking him into herself an inch at a time. Slowly, she began to move, rocking her hips back and forth almost leisurely as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her flush against his chest.

The urgency was gone, which seemed strange at first, until she recognized the intimacy of their position. Holding each other close, faces mere inches apart as she gazed into his eyes... she’d never felt such a deep connection, right down to the heart that thudded against her chest, beating in perfect time with her own. Clearly, Severus had noticed it too, his tension seeming to melt away as he stroked her back with gentle fingers.

“Mine?” she whispered, recalling her earlier question.

He exhaled sharply, pressing his forehead against hers. “Always.”

Only then did she increase the friction, no longer able to ignore her growing desire. The feeling of him inside her, stretching her, filling her completely... suddenly, she couldn’t get enough, lifting her hips and plunging them down as Severus groaned in encouragement. His hands closed around her waist, sweat beading his forehead as he began to move with her, thrusting harder and harder until she couldn’t take it anymore. She lost control in the exact moment that he did, her helpless whimper mingling with a harsh cry as their bodies shuddered together.

“God,” she muttered after a few minutes, having finally regained the ability to speak. “What was that?”

“I have no idea.”

He was still inside her, his arms holding her close, head resting on her shoulder. She laid her cheek against his hair, closing her eyes as she focused on the lingering sensations. The sound of his breathing, his slick skin pressed against hers... the spicy smell of his soap and clean male sweat, the pleasant tenderness between her legs. But then she felt something else, lifting her head to stare at him in dismay.

“The bloody charm. Damn it, we didn’t...”

“It’s all right,” he said, his voice calm. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You’ll make me a potion then?”

Technically, she didn’t need it. She still had a couple doses left of the potion she’d swiped from the Hospital Wing. But she’d already decided it should only be used as a last resort. Besides, she didn’t want to make Severus suspicious. A single incident was one thing, but if she kept reassuring him there was no need to worry about contraception, he might think... god, it would seem like she was trying to get pregnant on the sly.

“If you insist, but... well, perhaps we shouldn’t use either.”

Lily frowned, staring at him in bewilderment. “That would be taking a huge risk. You know what could happen... what probably *would* happen at the rate we’re going.”

To her surprise, he chuckled, leaning back to study her face. “A Gryffindor lecturing a Slytherin about taking risks? As if I’d ever make such a suggestion without being fully aware of the consequences.”

“You’re not saying... you can’t be...”

“That I’d like for us to have a child? Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

## 53. Glimmers of Hope

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### Chapter 53: Glimmers of Hope

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"You can't be serious."

"Why not?"

"A baby?" Lily stared at Severus, dumbfounded. "But I thought... you said..."

"I said I'd be willing to consider it, and I have."

"But..." She shook her head, reaching for her nightgown. "I thought we were talking about *someday*. In the future, you know, after the war is over. I didn't mean *now*. This would be the *worst* time..."

"Why?"

"Because there's a bloody war going on! Because I'm shut up here, and you... everyone thinks you're a traitor! I hate to say that, but you know as well as I do that there are plenty of people out there who'd like to see you dead. Quite a few who'd be happy to kill me, too, I'm sure. We can't know what will happen, don't know whether..."

"Exactly," he interrupted, his voice quiet. "Why wait for the right time when we can't be sure there's ever going to *be* one? If our lives are as precarious as you suggest, wouldn't it make sense not to put these things off?"

"You sound like a Gryffindor."

"Perhaps. But if I end up dying, it will hardly be a comfort to know that I erred on the side of caution. I imagine I'll spend my last moments regretting all the things I *didn't* do while I had the chance."

"You're not going to die, Severus."

"You can't know that."

"No," she admitted. "All right, fine. I guess I can understand your reasoning. But a *baby*? I'm sorry, but I can't see you wanting to have a child that badly. Unless you'd only be doing it for my sake, which I can assure you..."

"I wouldn't be."

"Then why?"

He shook his head. "You'll laugh."

"No, I won't. Promise."

“Very well.” He let out a heavy sigh, leaning his head back against the couch. “For multiple reasons, I suppose. To continue my line, as vain as it sounds. To have an heir. Perhaps I’d like a chance to prove that I’m capable of having a family, a luxury I never thought I’d have. And well, there’s you... I love you, Lily. Is it really so strange that I might want to have a child with you?”

“Of course not. But right now? Have you thought about what that would mean?”

“Quite thoroughly, I assure you.”

“Nine months of pregnancy.”

“Obviously,” he said dryly.

“Yes, but do you have any idea what that involves? Morning sickness. Mood swings. Crankiness and discomfort, odd cravings at all times of the night. And that’s the best case scenario. For all we know, there could be complications. Granted, I didn’t have any the first time around, but that was nearly twenty years ago. I’m not as young as I once was.”

“You’re a witch, Lily, not a Muggle. You could produce healthy children well into your 60s if you chose to do so. That said, yes, I’m well aware of what pregnancy entails. I’ve read plenty of books on the subject. Potions Masters are required to...”

She snorted. “Reading a book is hardly the same as dealing with it firsthand.”

“Perhaps not, but if you’re suggesting I wouldn’t be able to handle it, I might remind you of any number of unpleasant things I deal with on a daily basis. Somehow, I don’t think holding your hair back while you vomit would be half as distasteful as...”

“Fine, but that doesn’t answer my other question. What if there were complications? What about actually *having* the baby? What if something went wrong? What if you weren’t even here?”

“House elves.”

“What?”

“House elves,” he repeated. “Granted, the likelihood of me not being present would be minimal. I’m not summoned that frequently these days, nor am I likely to be gone for more than a couple hours when I am. But even if it did happen at the worst possible moment, you wouldn’t be alone. I can assure you of that.”

“Okay, but *house elves*?”

“You might not know this, having been raised in a Muggle household, but house elves are some of the best midwives in the Wizarding world. And as it happens, Hogwarts is full of them. I’m sure that at least a few have the proper training.”

Lily frowned. “But I thought you didn’t want them to know about me. Isn’t that why you won’t let them in here?”

“No, that’s simply because I value my privacy. It has nothing to do with lack of trust. Those elves are sworn to secrecy, on all matters pertaining to the school or resident

headmaster. If I ordered their silence, they couldn't reveal your existence even if they wanted to."

"October," she said quietly.

"What?"

"It's October, isn't it?"

"October 2, actually. Why?"

"Well, if I got pregnant within the next couple months, the baby would be born during the summer. Would we still be at Hogwarts?"

Severus hesitated, looking thoughtful. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Whatever happens, you'd be in a safe place."

"But if we weren't here, we wouldn't have the house elves. How..."

"Then I'd find you a Muggle midwife. Other than knowing a few spells, they serve the same function, yes? As for the spells, I'm sure I'd be able to manage that myself. As long as I Obliviated her afterwards, I can't imagine there'd be any problems."

Lily raised an eyebrow at him, her lips twitching. "You have it all figured out, don't you?"

"More or less."

"But have you thought about what it would be like to have a baby around? Newborns are exhausting. They fuss and they scream, demand constant attention..."

"I taught Potions for nearly two decades, Lily. Multiply one child by twenty, and you might as well be talking about one of my classes."

"Yes, but how often did your students wake you up at three in the morning?"

"More than you might expect," he said, looking faintly amused.

"And did you change their diapers every few hours," she said sweetly, "or only on occasion?"

He rolled his eyes. "If diapers are the best argument you can give me..."

"No, what I'm trying to say is that taking care of a child is a lot of work. Rewarding, yes, but it can be stressful. With all the other pressure you have to deal with, I just don't see how *more* responsibility would be a good idea right now. Granted, I'd be fine taking care of most things on my own, but then I'd be tired and distracted, and..."

"First," he interrupted, his expression grave. "Stop worrying about me. If we do this, rest assured that I'll be able to handle it. Second, help is always an option."

"House elves?"

"Indeed. If you needed a break, or I did, that could easily be arranged."

Lily nodded, her resolve weakening.

“Now,” he said, taking her hand. “If you’re raising these objections because you don’t *want* to have a child, please tell me. Say the word and we’ll never speak of it again. But if this is only a matter of working around a few obstacles...”

“Severus,” she interrupted, only to hesitate, not knowing what to say. Should she lie to him, tell him she wasn’t ready? A small part of her insisted that she should, still convinced that it would make things so much harder than they had to be. But another part had already surrendered, eager to go through with it. That was the dominant voice, as insistent as the pangs of longing that shuddered through her at the mere thought of being pregnant.

As long as she’d assumed that he didn’t want children, that a baby would make him miserable, she’d been able to stifle that voice. But now?

“I do,” she said softly.

“What?”

She cleared her throat, staring down at their joined hands. “I do want it. Very much. It’s just the timing that worries me. I already had one baby in the middle of a war, and that was... well, it was terrifying. Being hunted, knowing Harry was a target...”

“Do you regret it?”

“No! No, of course not. I wouldn’t trade Harry for the world.”

“And what does that tell you?”

“Okay, I see your point, but...”

“Besides, it wouldn’t be like that,” he said, gazing at her intently. “No prophecy, no betrayal, no surprise attacks. I’d keep you safe, Lily. Haven’t I already proven that I’m quite capable of doing so? Even now, you’re beyond the Dark Lord’s reach. He can’t touch you here. As for the war... that is a temporary situation. We know how to defeat him now. Once the Horcruxes are gone, which can’t be much longer...”

“But what if we lose?”

“That’s not going to happen,” he said firmly.

“How can you know that?”

“Because I trust Dumbledore. No, don’t interrupt. I know what you’re going to say, and in some ways, I agree. Yes, he’s withheld quite a few things. Been downright unscrupulous at times. But the one thing I *do* know is that he wished to see the Dark Lord fall as much as any of us. That is why I put my faith in him... he was the only man with the power to make that happen.”

“But he’s dead.”

Severus didn’t flinch. “Yes, but he left others with the power to carry out his plans. Your son. The Order. Me. We *will* destroy him, Lily, one way or another. I promise you that.”

“I believe you,” she said, letting out a soft sigh. “But back to the original topic...”

“Our child. Yes.”

She smiled. "It's strange to hear you say that."

"I'm sure you'll get used to it."

She hesitated, having saved her biggest concern for last. "What about Harry?"

"What about him?"

"Well, me being with you... that's going to be difficult enough for him to deal with as it is. Wouldn't a baby just make it worse?"

He shrugged. "I don't see how. I'm the one he'll have an issue with, after all, not you or the child. And as I've already told you, I'll do everything in my power to reconcile with him. I'll apologize, I'll..."

"Will you tell him the truth?"

"Truth?" His body tensed, his eyes growing wary. "What do you mean?"

"All of it. That you loved me from the beginning, and that's why you've been protecting him all these years. How you saved me, how much you struggled to bring me back. Everything. If he knew all that, knew how much you'd sacrificed for him — for *both* of us — I think that would make a world of difference."

"I really don't think..."

"He deserves to know."

"I'm not suggesting he doesn't. But my feelings for you, my reasons... so much of that is private, Lily. Even with you, I find it... difficult to discuss the finer points. However, if *you* want to tell him, you're free to do so. I can't see where I'd have any right to object."

"No," she said, shaking her head emphatically. "It needs to come from you. He needs to see the goodness in you, Severus, to hear these things from your perspective. Coming from anyone else, I just don't think it would have the same impact."

"But..."

"You want me to have a child with you," she interrupted. "Yes?"

"I do."

"Okay, we can do that," she paused, sucking in a deep breath, "on two conditions."

"Which are?"

"You've already agreed to the first. That you'll do your best to work things out with him, that you'll apologize..."

"And the second?" He prompted, though his expression made it clear that he already knew what was coming.

"That you'll be the one to tell him the truth. *Everything*."

"And if I say no?" he said quietly. "If I tell you I'm not sure I can do it?"

"Then I'll ask you to go downstairs and make me a potion."



“I see.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, reaching for his hand again. “I love you, Severus. Truly, I do. But I have to be fair to Harry, too. I wouldn’t feel right about having a child with you without doing everything in my power to make it easier on him. If you can’t tell him these things, I’m afraid he’ll never be able to see you for who you truly are. He won’t trust your apologies, he’ll just assume...”

“I’ll do it.”

“What?”

“I’ll do it,” he repeated, his expression inscrutable. “If it’s that important to you, I’ll find a way to make it happen.”

She frowned. “Are you sure? We could wait, you know. Give it a few months, see what happens. This isn’t a decision you have to make right now.”

“I’ve already made it.”

For several long moments, she sat silent, trying to absorb the enormity of what was happening. He truly wanted a baby? It still seemed unreal, his urgency the most bewildering part of all. And yet she couldn’t deny his sincerity... he would’ve never fought so hard or promised so much if he hadn’t been absolutely certain that this was what he wanted.

“Lily?”

“Okay,” she said softly. “Let’s do it.”

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Severus led Lily to the bedroom, making love to her for the second time that night before she fell asleep in his arms. By then, it was nearly four in the morning, only a couple hours before he needed to be up for work. Well, no matter. He didn’t feel the least bit tired, could’ve easily gotten up and prowled the castle until sunrise if he’d chosen to do so. It was only the warmth of her lying beside him that made him content to stay in bed, her breath caressing his shoulder as he buried his face in her hair.

She’d agreed to have a child. Not that he was surprised — he’d recognized the longing in her eyes even as she’d argued against the idea. She’d objected for his sake rather than her own, unmistakable relief in her expression each time he’d put one of her concerns to rest.

Nonetheless, she had a point. He had no idea what he was getting into, couldn’t imagine her pregnant let alone giving birth to a child. And dealing with a newborn... when it came to that, he was clueless, didn’t know a thing about feedings or diaper changes. Of course, there was a fair chance he’d be dead by then, would have no need to worry about such things. But just in case, perhaps it would be good to do a little research, just to be sure he was fully prepared. After all, if he *did* survive long enough to see the child born, he’d hardly expect Lily to handle everything on her own.

At the very least, he needed to learn more about pregnancy. While he had a fair understanding of the basics, he had to admit there was a lot he didn’t know. Potions for morning sickness, safe concoctions to handle aches and pains and insomnia... he could easily

supply her with those. But understanding her other needs, knowing what to expect at various stages? That was another matter entirely.

Lily let out a soft moan, interrupting his thoughts as she flipped onto her back. Unable to help himself, he slid a hand beneath the covers, laying it across her bare stomach. It was as flat as his own, but for how much longer? For all he knew, she might have conceived already, her body starting to change within a matter of weeks.

The thought filled him with panic, making him question all over again whether he was doing the right thing. Could he handle this? Could she? What if it only made matters worse?

Granted, he still believed this was the best way to protect her, that giving her another child could make all the difference in the world. But what if something went wrong? What if he could no longer guarantee she'd have a safe haven, or worse, what if she lost the baby? The possibility of miscarriage hadn't even occurred to him before, but wasn't it fairly common?

And then a memory from his own childhood tickled at his subconscious, one he hadn't thought about in years. He couldn't have been more than five or six, but he could still picture his mother's slightly rounded belly, her eyes shining as she'd told him that the doctors had been wrong, that he was going to have a little brother or sister. But soon thereafter, he remembered spots of blood on the carpet, the sound of low pitched sobs from behind the bedroom door. He hadn't seen his mother for days until at last, she'd emerged with red rimmed eyes, never speaking a word as she'd shuffled to the kitchen to fix herself a drink.

"What happened to your tummy?"

That had been the only time she'd ever struck him, a stinging slap that sent him crashing to the floor.

"Never speak of it again," she'd told him, snatching up the bottle and heading back to the bedroom.

That had been when the drinking started, when he'd learned to stop hoping for even the occasional smile. She'd never been the same after that, her eyes growing ever more distant until the day he'd realized she'd become a stranger. Not harsh or cruel like his father, more like a ghost of who'd she'd once been, staring out windows with a vacant expression as if she simply didn't want to be there anymore.

"Shit," he muttered, wondering if it was too late to change his mind. But he already knew the answer to that, knew he didn't have it in him to extinguish that joyful light he'd seen in Lily's eyes. No choice now but to go through with it and hope for the best.

And perhaps after all, it was too late for him, too. As absurd as it seemed, the idea was growing on him, for reasons he couldn't begin to understand. Protecting Lily, leaving her with a part of himself? Yes, that made sense. But it was something more than that, too, a strange, possessive instinct that had overtaken him when he'd been making love to her just a little while before. Suddenly, nothing had aroused him more than the thought of getting her pregnant, driving him over the edge as he'd released himself inside her. Not just for pleasure this time, but something much more significant, visceral and primal, and...

Well, he didn't know what it was. But it had been clear to him in that moment that he didn't hate the idea, that there was a certain appeal in creating a child, regardless of

circumstance. Not something he was ready to explore too deeply just yet, but it was there.

Gradually, the room began to lighten, reminding him that he didn't have the luxury of staying in bed all day. Kissing Lily gently on the forehead, he heaved himself out of bed, grabbing fresh robes as he headed for the shower. Odd how different the world seemed as he stepped out into his office, as if his perception of reality would never be quite the same. For the first time in his life, it felt like anything was possible, that all he had to do was reach out and take it.

The impression had faded by the time he finished his second cup of coffee, gone entirely by lunchtime. And yet in its place was something equally pleasing... the realization that for once, he was looking forward to what the future might hold.

Well, *some* of it, at least.

## 54. Remembrance

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### Chapter 54: Remembrance

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“Did you see Severus?” Lily asked, smiling as the cat took a flying leap and landed on the bed.

*He’s down in the dungeon teaching Potions.*

“Teaching? Why...”

*Slughorn’s feeling ill, or so he says. If you ask me, I think he just wanted to get a head start on his Halloween plans. He’s having a party tonight.*

“Another one?” Lily rolled her eyes. “Figures. It’s just a shame Severus has to pick up the slack. He’s got too much on his shoulders as it is.”

*Honestly, I don’t think he minds too much. I watched him for a few minutes, and... well, it’s hard to explain. He was glowering at the students, barking out instructions... no different than the way he used to teach, really, but I got the feeling he was glad to have something useful to do. Always seems bored out of his mind when he’s just sitting around in the Headmaster’s office.*

Lily nodded. “Well, at least he has something to keep him occupied. He needs that today.”

*Halloween?* The cat paused, then gave her an apologetic look. *Right. I’m sorry.*

“Don’t be. It’s fine.” That wasn’t entirely true, of course, but she wasn’t in the mood to discuss it. “When is his next class?” she asked instead. “Would it be safe for me to go out now, or should I wait?”

*Go ahead. He’s in a double with the fifth years at the moment, and I heard him telling one of the Carrows that he’d be in the Great Hall for lunch. He shouldn’t be back anytime soon.*

“Okay. You’ll keep an eye out, won’t you?”

*Of course. Where are you planning on going?*

“I thought I’d check out the passage in here.”

The cat bobbed her head. *Well, just be careful.*

Lily had been out several times over the past few weeks, visiting the kitchens again and even taking a trip to the library. But this was the first time she’d tried the bedroom passage, her heart beating swiftly in anticipation as she pressed the button.

The openings in the bathroom, hallway, and study each had one main passage, while the one next to the front door had two. This one had several, however, forming a perfect cross

with four precise directions. There were even crude etchings on the wall, indicating where each of them would lead her.

North to Gryffindor.  
South to Slytherin.  
East to Ravenclaw.  
West to Hufflepuff.

North seemed like an obvious choice, so she took the southern path instead, struck by the sensation of descending through the castle as the air grew cooler and more humid. Gradually, she began to see smaller passages branching off on either side, following one until she emerged into a storage room that looked like it hadn't been used in centuries. Another led her to the Potions classroom — she jerked her hand away from the button as she heard Severus's deep, sonorous voice on the other side of the wall.

"Did I not say that an Invigoration Draught requires *three* measures of Doxy eggs? Why then, Mr. Meadows, did you find it necessary to add five?"

"Sir, I didn't..."

Cringing, as if he might sense her close proximity, she backed away, choosing a different passage. This one took her even deeper into the dungeon, until finally, she came to the end. Pressing the tiny silver button, she sucked in a sharp breath as the wall slid away to reveal a room she instantly recognized. Severus's private lab? Did that mean Dumbledore had had access?

Well, maybe not. She remembered Severus telling her that the lab was protected by the strongest wards imaginable, that she was the only other person allowed to enter. Could she still do so?

Yes, she realized as she stepped inside, forgetting about the wards as she ran her fingers over empty vials, inspecting the meticulous rows of ingredients that lined the walls. There was a thin layer of dust over the equipment, making it clear that Severus hadn't used it in quite some time. That realization left her feeling melancholy, though deeper than that was a sense of relief. She had the means to brew now, wouldn't have to worry about smuggling potions from the Hospital Wing should the need arise.

Even now, she itched to light one of the burners, to feel steam dampening her hair as she mixed and stirred. She hadn't realized how deeply she'd missed Potions, so much that she wouldn't have cared whether she was brewing Polyjuice or just a basic cure for boils. But she ignored the temptation, reminding herself that the lab should only be used as a last resort. Sooner or later, Severus would come back down here, would notice if the room had been tampered with. And since she was the only other person who had access...

With a heavy sigh, she ducked back into the passageway, not realizing she was headed toward Gryffindor Tower until she came face to face with another silver button. She hesitated, weighing the need for caution against the intense, overwhelming desire to visit a place that had once felt like home. Should she attempt it? This part of the castle wasn't nearly as secluded as the dungeon, and yet... well, she couldn't hear any noise from the other side.

Holding her breath, she pushed the button, Disillusioning herself before stepping out into a tiny alcove. The first thing she saw was plush, red fabric, the inverted silhouette of a lion...

she pushed the tapestry aside, gasping as she spotted the Fat Lady's portrait.

Of course, it had been a while since she'd seen it, but she hadn't expected it to affect her so deeply. Was it because she'd spent the past several weeks lowering her shields? Or was it that on this day of all days, her memories were so much closer to the surface than they usually were?

Whatever the reason, her imagination took over, catapulting her into the past. She saw images of her younger self laughing with friends, her arms filled with books as she'd casually uttered the password. A vision of James coming up the stairs... hazy at first, then much clearer as he drew closer. His expression changed, less confident but far more gentle, eyes transforming into a perfect replica of her own.

Harry...

Forgetting herself, she reached out for him, desperate to make contact. But then the image faded, replaced by a scene she remembered all too well.

*"I'm sorry."*

*"I'm not interested."*

*"I'm sorry!"*

*"Save your breath."*

And then there were footsteps, followed by the sound of an unfamiliar voice.

*"Forgot my Transfiguration homework. Be down in a minute."*

Abruptly, the memory dissolved, jolting her back to the present as she realized someone was coming up the stairs. Dropping the edge of the tapestry, she darted back into the passage, not stopping until she was safely back in the Headmaster's quarters. And with that, her restlessness was gone. All she wanted was a hot bath, a chance to clear her head and figure out how to deal with wounds that had never fully healed.

Turning on the faucets, she slipped out of her clothes, stepping into the water as fragrant steam filled the bathroom. She closed her eyes with a soft sigh, leaning her head against the edge of the tub.

Overall, she and Severus were making good progress when it came to lowering her shields. They'd made it all the way through Harry's fourth year, and while she couldn't help her surges of anger, they'd been able to talk things through in the aftermath, resolving one issue before moving on to the next. Of course, some incidents were easier to deal with than others — she'd chosen to sleep on the couch one night due to the "Polyjuice Incident", furious at Severus for accusing Harry of thievery and threatening to slip Veritaserum into his pumpkin juice.

His attempts to explain himself had gotten him nowhere — only when she'd woken up to find his memories waiting for her in the Pensieve had she understood why he'd acted that way. She hadn't known that Harry and his friends had stolen the same ingredients in the past, nor had she expected the genuine regret Severus had felt when he'd learned of her son's innocence.

Beyond that, she was starting to sense a change in him, the result of seeing so many of these incidents through her eyes rather than his own. His voice was starting to lose that hard edge whenever he spoke of Harry, snide remarks giving way to grudging acceptance. He'd even started using Harry's first name more often instead of referring to him as "Potter" or "the boy."

That was wonderful, of course, but there were so many other issues they'd never talked about. Their school years, that terrible falling out... why she'd chosen to cut him off, and of course, her reasons for ending up with James. Severus seemed content to avoid the subject, making it clear that he didn't blame her for anything. But now more than ever, there were things she needed to say, memories that would always haunt her as long as she kept them to herself.

And what about him? Didn't he deserve to know the truth? All he really had were his own assumptions, and considering how little he valued himself...

Yes, definitely a conversation they needed to have. Maybe even tonight, though there was no telling what mood he'd be in when he returned. Halloween had never been easy for him — in the past, he'd spent the day in brooding silence, eager to retire to the privacy of the dungeon so he could drown his sorrows in a bottle of firewhiskey.

This year was different, of course, but that didn't mean he wasn't affected by the anniversary. Seeing her lifeless body in Godric's Hollow, believing she was dead for so many years? Those scars would always be a part of him, which she'd realized that morning as he'd awoken her with an urgent whisper. The way he'd made love to her... intense, almost desperate, holding her so tight she could barely breathe. Only when she'd protested had he relaxed somewhat, whispering an apology against her ear as his frantic thrusts had given way to a more sedate rhythm. But she'd still felt it, a naked vulnerability she'd never sensed in him before, a single tear escaping from the corner of his eye as he'd released himself inside her.

"I need to get to work," he'd muttered as soon as he was finished, pulling out of her arms as he'd reached for his clothes. A quick shower and he'd returned to the bedroom fully dressed, his expression stoic.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," he'd said casually, leaning over to kiss her goodbye. "I'll see you tonight."

Returning to the present, Lily climbed out of the tub, drying herself off before glancing in the mirror. No, she couldn't predict what mood he'd be in, but either way, she intended on making the evening as pleasant as possible for him.

Reaching for a pair of hand towels, she transfigured them into an underwear set crafted out of sheer, delicate lace. She pulled them on, admiring her handiwork before grabbing for a third towel, which was transformed into a pale pink dress. Nothing too fancy, though it flattered her figure, the heart-shaped neckline dipping low to expose the swells of her breasts.

Satisfied, she brushed her hair until it gleamed, leaving it loose around her shoulders. A touch of fragrance, simple glammers to bring out the sparkle in her eyes and the color in her cheeks, and then she was done, scrutinizing her reflection one last time before heading into the study to wait.

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“You look lovely,” Severus said, gazing at Lily appreciatively.

“Thank you.”

She’d chosen to wear Muggle clothing, an exquisite dress that highlighted her curves and her long, shapely legs. But it was the low neckline he liked most, his eyes lingering on the delicious view as she leaned forward to grab a slice of bread. Indeed, just the sight of her was arousing enough, but the realization that she must’ve dressed this way to please *him*? It was all he could do not to push the platters aside and take her right there on the table.

*Don’t be ridiculous*, he told himself, clearing his throat as he reached for the bottle of wine. “More?”

“Please.”

The meal had come at a price, forcing him to endure one of Dumbledore’s obnoxious interrogations. But he’d wanted to bring her a proper dinner for once, not just sandwiches or whatever leftovers the house elves could scrape together. He’d ordered the food early, remembering her favorites as he’d requested herb baked chicken and fresh vegetables, scalloped potatoes smothered with cheese, a loaf of fresh baked bread, and treacle tart for dessert. He’d finished that off with a couple bottles of elf-made wine, barely managing to carry it all as he’d headed for his quarters.

*“So much food, Severus, yet you never seem to gain an ounce.”*

Rolling his eyes, he pushed the memory away, filling Lily’s glass to the brim. “What did you do today?”

“Took a bath, did a bit of reading.”

“And what did you read?”

She shrugged. “A book on Transfiguration, another on Charms. Just a few things I’m still trying to brush up on. I also...” She trailed off, her eyes darting to the book that lay open on the couch.

“Is that the one I brought you?”

“Yes,” she said, her face taking on a melancholy expression.

“It’s only been a few weeks,” he said quietly. “These things take time.”

“I know.” She set down her fork, letting out a heavy sigh. “It just seems like it should’ve happened by now. I mean the first time, I wasn’t even...”

“Wasn’t what?” he prompted.

“Nevermind.”

He shook his head, giving her an exasperated look. “Lily, I’m quite aware that you’ve been pregnant before. There’s no need to shy away from it like it’s some forbidden topic. What were you about to say?”



“That I wasn’t even trying. It was an accident. Well, that isn’t the nicest way to put it, but...”

“Interesting. I’d always assumed...”

“You thought it was planned? Oh, no.” She laughed, lifting her glass to her lips. “Don’t get me wrong — I *wanted* Harry. More than anything in the world once I got used to the idea. But I’d never intended on starting a family that soon.”

A family. With James Potter. Severus felt a stab of jealousy, though he did his best to ignore it. He’d known the subject would come up sooner or later, especially now that they were trying to have their own child. It was only natural for Lily to relate back to her previous experience, to look for answers there. But the thought of James Bloody Potter...

Abruptly, he silenced the insidious voice, determined to leave it in the past where it belonged.

“Can I have some more?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, pouring her a refill before topping off his own glass. “Anyway, I don’t think it has anything to do with trying or not trying. Just a matter of timing.”

“But we’ve been doing it every day. That’s more than me and James...” She sputtered, giving him a horrified look. “What I mean is, he wasn’t... he didn’t... shit.”

Suddenly, Severus noticed that her cheeks were flushed, her eyes a little too bright. She was halfway through her third glass by then, sloshing a little on the table as she set it down.

“Lily,” he said, his lips twitching. “I believe you’re drunk.”

“I am not. Takes me at least four glasses before I even *start*...”

“How long has it been since you’ve had a drink?”

She lifted one hand, counting on her fingers before she gave up, letting out an exaggerated sigh. “New Year’s, 1981.”

Unable to help himself, he snorted. “Nearly two decades? Yes, definitely intoxicated. Not that I have any complaints, mind you. As I recall, you were always rather amusing in such a state.”

“Like that time we stole my dad’s beer?”

He nodded, chuckling at the memory.

“How old were we? I can’t remember.”

“14. It was the summer before fourth year, the time we stayed out all night. I still don’t know how you managed that without getting caught.”

She giggled. “Want to know the truth?”

“Desperately.”

“I Confunded Petunia. Made her tell our parents I was staying over at a girlfriend’s house.”

“And that worked?”

“Of course it did. Like they would’ve ever expected her to lie for me.”

“Good point. What about the beer?”

Another giggle. “Terrible, I know, but I made Petunia tell them she’d drank it herself.”

Severus laughed outright at that, a rare occurrence that felt surprisingly good. “Well, no more than she deserved. Insufferable little hag.”

“Knowing what I know now, I’d have to agree,” she said, her expression growing serious. “I miss them.”

“Who?” He frowned, thrown by the abrupt shift in topic. “Your parents?”

She nodded.

“I don’t blame you. They were good people.”

“Do you know what happened to them?”

“No. I found their obituaries once, but cause of death wasn’t mentioned. I intended on investigating further, just never found the opportunity to do so.”

She hesitated, taking a long drink before holding her glass out for another refill. She’d already had too much, of course, but this hardly seemed the time to mention it. Silently, he topped her off, waiting patiently for her to speak.

“Mum died in a car accident. Spring of seventh year.” She paused, letting out a shuddering breath. “They said she was killed instantly, so at least she didn’t suffer, but I... I was devastated. When I went home for the funeral, Dad was a mess. Even worse off than I was. I wanted to stay with him, but he insisted that I go back to school. If I’d known...”

“Known what?” he prompted, his voice gentle.

“He just sort of...” wasted away. I was back at Hogwarts for three months, and by the time I got home, I hardly even recognized him. He’d lost so much weight, had stopped eating, barely slept. Just kept taking these pills the doctor had prescribed him. And then one night... well, he must’ve taken too many. I went to check on him the next morning, and...”

“It’s all right,” he interrupted as the tears in her eyes spilled over. “You don’t have to tell me the rest.”

She nodded, letting out a snuffle. “That’s why, you know.”

“Why what?”

“Why I got married so fast. I was scared and sad and I didn’t want to be alone. There wasn’t much money left after paying for two funerals, and... well, I couldn’t bear the thought of staying in that house. So when James offered...”

“I see,” he said quietly.

“On top of everything else, there was a war going on. Yes, I wanted to fight, but I wanted to feel safe at the same time. So much for Gryffindor courage, eh?”

“On the contrary,” he said, coming to kneel beside her chair. “I think you’re very brave. You saw a chance and you took it, you...” He trailed off, not knowing what to say. This was another shift in his perception, since he’d always assumed that Lily had married Potter because she’d been madly in love with him. To think she might’ve done it for practical reasons...

Well, in many ways, that made more sense.

Of course, he’d chosen to believe the fairytale version. That had been easy to do when he’d been blinded by jealousy, still bewildered by the loss of her. But deep down... yes, he had to admit that something had always felt *off* about that version. Maybe because he knew Lily, had known her better than anyone. Impulsive, yes, but fiercely independent, full of hopes and dreams that certainly hadn’t included getting married straight out of school. And Potter, of all people? It was difficult to see how she could’ve gone from abject hatred to wedded bliss in just a few short years.

Of course, he’d never asked her about it directly, afraid of what her answer might be. He hadn’t wanted to hear her say that Potter had been the love of her life, proving that he could never, ever measure up. But in light of what she’d just said...

Well, perhaps it was time to face his demons.

“Lily,” he said, careful to keep his expression blank. “Tell me the rest.”

“About James?” Her eyes went wide.

“Yes. Tell me everything.”

## 55. Silencing Demons

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### Chapter 55: Silencing Demons

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“James?” Lily hesitated, giving Severus a wary look as he knelt beside her chair. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“At the beginning?” he suggested. “That seems like a logical place.”

“Okay, but most of that you already know. I never liked him. I thought he was rude, cocky, immature...”

“I believe ‘arrogant toerag’ is the phrase you used.”

“Well, he was! The way he used to strut around like a damn peacock, thinking he was better than everyone else. Always bragging and boasting, and...”

“Acting like an absolute shit,” he interrupted, raising an eyebrow. “Yes, I know. Which is why...”

“Why you don’t understand how my feelings could’ve changed?”

He nodded, relieved she hadn’t forced him to say it.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t understand it either. Not completely. It made sense at the time, but now...”

“You loved him,” he said, then clapped his mouth shut, wondering where the bloody words had come from. Were there no limits to this masochistic mood that had grabbed him by the throat?

“It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. When you called me a Mudblood...” She paused, giving him an apologetic look as he winced. “Well, I guess it started before that. When we were fighting all the time, when you started hanging out with those...”

“Future Death Eaters.”

She nodded. “Those were the people who wanted to hurt me, Severus. Maybe you couldn’t see it at the time, but...”

“I didn’t *want* to see it,” he said quietly.

“To me, it felt like a betrayal. A constant threat. And James and Sirius... yeah, they were arrogant. I *hated* the things they did, especially when they picked on you. But then I’d hear them talking in the Common Room... they wanted to fight for what was right, to protect

people like me. I don't know... I started to see them in a different light. But I didn't want to choose, thought that maybe..."

"I forced the issue, didn't I?"

"You both did."

"How?" he asked, even though he knew the answer was going to hurt like hell.

"That day, you know... when I saw what James was doing to you. I was furious, I..."

"You thought it was funny," he interrupted, refusing to meet her eyes.

"What?! I did *not*!"

He hadn't wanted to bring it up, but now that he had, he couldn't seem to stop himself. "You did. I saw you, Lily. I'd spent years memorizing every expression you'd ever made. Do you think I didn't know what you looked like when you were about to laugh? I was rather impressed that you managed to restrain yourself, really."

There was a sharp intake of breath, followed by a long silence. When she finally spoke again, her voice was deathly quiet. "Yes, I *did* restrain myself. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I'd made my choice. Granted, I might've wavered for a second, but I *did* choose you. I was ready to tell them all to go to hell, until you..."

"Said something stupid. Because I was embarrassed. *Humiliated*. Didn't even know what the fuck I was saying until the words had already left my mouth. But I didn't mean it, even at the time. I would've *never*..."

"That was the part that scared me the most."

"What?" He frowned.

"I knew you would've never said it on purpose. That's what made it worse. Realizing that that way of thinking had infected you so much that it wasn't even a conscious choice."

He paused, pondering that for a moment. "I suppose I can see why you'd feel that way. But to me, you were different. You'd always been the exception. You can't imagine how horrified I was when I..."

"Proved that I wasn't?"

"Yes," he said reluctantly. "Though I couldn't see that at the time."

She touched his head for the briefest moment before drawing her hand away, reaching for her wine. "I've always regretted it, you know. Ending our friendship that way."

He let out a bitter laugh. "It's not like I gave you much choice."

"Yes, but I couldn't help thinking that if I'd given you another chance, if I'd tried harder, maybe things would've turned out differently. I've always wondered..."

Letting out a heavy sigh, he sank down until he was sitting on the floor, waiting until she joined him there before he spoke again. "I'm afraid I can't answer that question. No more

than you can. I'd like to tell you that you could've changed my mind, could've shown me the error of my ways. And maybe that's true, but it's equally likely that it would've made no difference. Hell, it might've turned out even worse."

"Maybe," she said, giving him a sad smile.

"I do understand what it's like to wonder though. You don't know how many times I've asked myself what might've happened if I'd never said that word, if I'd just kept my mouth shut. If I hadn't given you so many reasons to hate me..."

She shook her head vehemently. "I never hated you, Severus. Never. I was disappointed in you. Furious. Heartbroken. But I never..."

"Really?"

"Yes," she said, letting out a strange sound that was somewhere between a sniffle and a laugh. "Oh, don't get me wrong. I *wanted* to hate you. It would've made things much easier, believe me. But I could never manage it. Losing you was one of the most painful things I've ever had to go through."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I wasn't worth that."

"Yes, you were. I think that was the worst part of all. I mean, that you never realized how much I cared about you. I just... I knew I was losing you, and I couldn't keep fighting... I couldn't... I'm sorry."

He pulled her into his arms, his eyes watering as she wept against his shoulder. "Don't apologize," he murmured, with more gentleness than he'd ever known he was capable of. "It isn't your fault. It never was."

"Then whose fault is it?" she asked, her words muffled. "If you're about to tell me it was yours..."

"In part," he admitted. "But the truth is that both of us were too young to know what the hell we were doing. Combine that with house rivalries and an encroaching war, manipulation coming from all sides, and... well, perhaps it's foolish for either of us to blame ourselves."

Of course, he didn't fully believe that. He'd never excused his actions, and he had no intention of starting now. But he had to acknowledge that there was some merit in what he'd said, and more importantly, that it was exactly what she needed to hear. She'd never be able to let go of her guilt if she thought she was doing so at his expense.

"Maybe you're right," she said, sounding a bit more steady. "Anyway, we can't change it now, can we? All we can do is learn from our mistakes."

"Indeed."

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Do you still want me to tell you the rest?"

"If you wish," he said.

"I didn't go running straight to James, you know. It took me a long time to forgive him for the way he'd treated you. And even then, the only reason I did was out of... well, it was out of loneliness, I suppose. I don't want to call it a rebound, but..."

"Rebound?" he said sharply.

"Well, yeah." She shrugged. "I'd lost my best friend, which was bad enough, but to lose the first boy I'd ever had feelings for on top of that?"

"You..." He trailed off, trying to remember how to breathe. "You had *feelings* for me?"

"Yes. I didn't fully understand them at the time, but I did. That was another reason it hurt so much... what you said, you know. I realized you could never be with someone like me. Falling in love with you could only mean getting my heart broken. I had to cut you off, had to put distance between us, I..."

"Love?" he echoed, feeling stunned.

"Well, I don't know that I was there yet, but... yes, it was headed in that direction."

"Fuck."

"I'm sorry." She lifted her head, her eyes reminding him of damp clovers as they met his own. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you that."

"No," he said, his voice choked. "I'm glad you did."

On one hand, she was right. It was extraordinarily painful to realize he might've had a chance with her, the possibility that so much sorrow could've been averted. But then again, her words reached out to the awkward boy who still existed inside him, the one who'd spent his entire life feeling like he could never measure up. Knowing Lily loved him *now* was one thing... but realizing she'd been attracted to him even then, long before he'd done a damn thing to redeem himself in her eyes?

"Are you okay?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"I can stop if you want."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Please, continue."

"All right then. Well, James was nice to me. It's as simple as that. Persistent, too. He grew up a bit, lost some of his swagger, and I started running out of reasons to turn him down. He really was trying, and I... I just wanted to be happy."

"And were you?"

"In some ways." She let out a heavy sigh, laying her head on his shoulder again. "He made everything so easy, like I didn't have to worry about..."

Unable to help himself, Severus snorted. "Well, he always was a bit of a simpleton."

"Severus!"

"Sorry."

“You’re not wrong though. Not completely. I mean, James was highly intelligent in some ways. Great with magic. But emotionally speaking... well yes, he *was* simple. I never had to work to figure him out, I...”

“Not like you did with me.”

She nodded. “Please don’t take that the wrong way. I’m not saying one was better than the other, just at the time...”

“You needed a break?”

“Exactly. How did you know?”

He smirked. “Emotional complexity. Makes one reasonably perceptive.”

“I suppose that’s it, really. James wasn’t perceptive at all. Not where my feelings were concerned. Sounds odd, I know, but I *liked* that about him. I didn’t want to let anyone get too close, and he made that very easy. He took everything at face value, never asked a lot of questions. And since his friends were always around, I never had to...”

“So what you’re saying is he never challenged you?”

“Not really.”

“Sounds dreadfully boring.”

She hesitated, letting that comment pass. “I *did* love him, Severus. I’m not going to lie about that. But not...”

“Not what?” he prompted, holding his breath.

“Not the way I love you. What I feel for you goes much deeper than anything I ever felt for him. It always has. Much more intense. That’s why I ran from it, I guess... I wasn’t ready to be that vulnerable, especially when I already felt like I was losing you. I chose James because I could be with him without risking so much. Of course, I didn’t realize that at the time, but...”

She trailed off as he let out a choking sound, burying his face in his hands.

“Severus? God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“Bloody hell, woman,” he managed to sputter. “Of all the things to apologize for...”

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close as his shoulders began to shake. As much as he tried to fight it, he couldn’t help himself, soaking her skin with his tears. They could’ve been bitter tears, sorrow over all the possibility that had been lost to him so many years before. But this, at least, wasn’t his fault. She hadn’t been ready. Perhaps he hadn’t either, though of course, he hadn’t realized it at the time.

No... he had to admit that it was better this way, that it would’ve never worked if it had happened too soon. Strange, but it had been separation that had bound them together, years of denial their only hope of ever recognizing the truth. And now...

“Lily, I...” But he couldn’t bring himself to tell her what was in his heart, feeling like the words were choking him as he reached up to grab another bottle of wine. He popped the cork,



not bothering with a glass as he lifted it to his lips.

“Can I have some?”

Feeling slightly more composed, he cocked an eyebrow. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“No. I’m starting to sober up.”

“Fair enough.” He passed her the bottle, watching her take a long drink before she handed it back.

The next thing he knew, they were stretched out on the floor with an empty bottle lying beside them, her arms and legs draped heavily over his as she fumbled with the buttons of his shirt. He wasn’t feeling too coordinated himself, tugging clumsily at her dress straps before giving it up as a bad job and sliding a hand up her thigh instead.

She reached down, lifting her skirt to give him a tantalizing glimpse of lacy underwear. “Transfigured them myself,” she said, her voice slurring slightly. “You like?”

“Very much.” He ran his fingers over the fabric, nodding in approval at her handiwork.

“Good. Now take them off.”

Pausing, he glanced up at her, attempting a stern expression. “That sounds like an order.”

“It is,” she said sweetly.

“Well then,” he breathed, slipping his fingers beneath her waistband and drawing the scrap of lace down over her legs. “I suppose I have no choice but to obey.”

“Mmmm...”

“What else would you like me to do?”

“Touch me.”

He sucked in a sharp breath, aroused beyond belief by the game they were playing. “Where?”

“You know...” Blushing slightly, she lifted her hips, giving them a little wiggle.

“I see.”

Gently, he nudged her thighs apart, sliding a hand between them. Rubbing her slowly at first, he kept his eyes fixed on hers, relishing the sound of her soft moans as he gradually increased the friction.

“Like this?”

“Umm...”

At that point, he couldn’t take it anymore, his erection straining so hard against his trousers it was almost painful. He reached down to unfasten them, groaning in relief when he finally managed to work the buttons free. Resuming his attentions, he penetrated her with his fingers, responding to her wordless signals until at last, she let out a sharp gasp, her body quivering with satisfaction.

“What now?” he murmured, glancing up to admire her blissful expression.

“Anything.”

“Anything?”

“Yes,” she said, opening her eyes to gaze up at him. “Anything you want.”

If he’d been in a different mood, that suggestion would’ve conjured up all sorts of wicked ideas. As it was, he just needed to be close to her, half drunk and still reeling from her stunning revelations.

“Turn over,” he whispered in her ear. “Onto your side.”

He pressed against her from behind, wrapping an arm around her as he cradled her against his chest. Holding his breath, he eased himself inside her, taking a moment to savor her delicious warmth before he started to move. Slowly, gently, hand moving restlessly over her body as he caressed her hip, her thighs, plucking at the buttons on the front of her dress until at last, they came free. Soft, warm flesh filling his palm, her sweet breath tickling his cheek as she turned her head, peeping at him over her shoulder.

“Kiss me.”

Letting out a ragged groan, he covered her mouth with his, swallowing her whimpers as his hips picked up momentum. Faster, harder, until he forced himself to slow down, determined to make it last as long as possible. He focused on her instead, hand sliding down to delve between her thighs as he continued to move with a smooth, steady rhythm.

She gasped something unintelligible as he began to stroke her, his fingers moving in lazy circles as he felt her start to tremble. Only when he sensed that she was hovering on the brink did he let go, thrusting into her much more deeply as he caught her clitoris between his fingers.

The results were magnificent, his name emerging as a helpless sob as her body tightened around him. One cry and then another, until at last, she relaxed against his chest with a soft murmur of contentment. Satisfied with his performance, he allowed himself to lose control, a quick succession of frantic thrusts followed by a shuddering groan.

And then there was only silence, warm and serene, Lily snuggling against him as she entwined his fingers with hers. Vaguely, it occurred to him that they should move, that sleeping on the floor would be ridiculous when the bedroom was right next door. But the carpet was plush and thick, more comfortable than any bed he could imagine as his eyes drifted closed.

After a moment, he forced them open again, making one last, valiant attempt to stay awake. But then he felt the steady rise and fall of her back against his chest, lifting his head to confirm what he already knew.

She was fast asleep.

With that, he gave up the fight, burying his face in her hair as he joined her in the land of dreams.

“Fuck,” he muttered, resisting the urge to lie back down as he gripped his head in his hands. The peaceful darkness was gone, replaced by a world of painful sensation... glaring sunlight pouring in through the window, an unpleasant churning in the pit of his stomach, and... bloody hell! He released his hold on his skull, clutching his forearm instead.

Why the hell was he being summoned in the middle of the morning? Didn't the Dark Lord know he had a job to do? Well no, it was Saturday, wasn't it? Shit.

Rising to his feet, he hurried to the bathroom, rummaging under the counter until he found what he was looking for. One swig of the hangover solution followed by a hot shower and he began to feel better, yanking on his robes as he returned to the study.

“Lily? Lily, wake up.”

She came back to consciousness with a long-suffering groan, cracking one eye open to glare up at him. “Do you have to be so loud?”

“Here, take some of this.” He set the vial on the floor beside her, then sat down on the couch to pull on his boots. And then he withdrew his wand, bringing it to his temple and dropping memory after memory into the Pensieve.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m being summoned.”

“Oh, no. *Now?*”

“I’m afraid so.”

“But he doesn’t usually...”

“No,” he said, letting out a heavy sigh. “No, he does not.”

Lily sat up, pressing a hand to her mouth. “Harry... oh god, you don’t think...”

Yes, that was exactly what he was thinking, but damned if he was going to tell her that. “I don’t know. Probably not, but...” He trailed off, hissing from between clenched teeth as the burning increased. Swiftly, he added a few more memories to the basin, then rose to his feet and headed for the door. She was already there waiting for him, wrapping her arms around his neck as she gave him a quick, fierce kiss.

“All those things I said last night...”

“Yes?” he said, then held his breath.

“I just wanted you to know that I meant them. Now that I’m sober, you know.”

And with that, the lingering worry he hadn’t even had time to acknowledge was put to rest. He smiled, which seemed like an odd thing to do under the circumstances, his flesh feeling like it was about to catch fire as the Dark Lord continued with his incessant demands. And yet somehow, it was exactly what he needed, a flash of pure joy amidst the turmoil.

“I know you did,” he said quietly. “And I...” But there was no time to express his feelings properly, even if he could’ve found a way to put them into words.

“I know.”

"I'll see you soon."

With that, he turned away, hoping like hell that he was right.

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No more than half an hour later, he was back in his office, his shoulders gradually relaxing as he finished off a hot cup of coffee.

"What did he want?"

He turned to face the portrait, then shrugged. "Nothing important. Just a routine check. I think he was hoping to catch me off guard."

"And did he?" Dumbledore asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Surely you know the answer to that."

"Do I?" There was a thoughtful pause. "I'm not so sure."

Severus scowled, dropping into his chair. "Clearly, there's some point you'd like to make. Would you mind telling me what it is? I have better things to do than..."

"Yes, I'm sure you do. As it happens, that is exactly what I wanted to discuss. Severus, I want to know who you're hiding in there."

"I already told you..."

"Oh, lay off!" A different voice interjected. "He's hardly the first headmaster to keep a mistress. I assure you he won't be the last."

"Thank you, Phineas," Severus said dryly. "Though as it happens, I am *not* keeping a mistress."

"Maybe he's a homosexual," Dilys suggested, shooting a pointed look at Dumbledore. "Wouldn't be the first time for *that* either."

Shaking his head, Severus let out an exasperated sigh. The other portraits had become much more talkative now that they'd gotten used to him, which was convenient when he needed them to provide a distraction. But on the other hand, they could be quite the nuisance.

"We've already discussed this," he said, returning his attention to Dumbledore's portrait. "Repeatedly. As I recall, I *also* told you..."

"Told him to butt out, you did."

"Yes, Quentin. Thank you. Anyway, my point is..."

"Severus, you know what we're facing. Better than anyone. You uunderstand what's required of you — or at least, I thought you did. I'm sorry, my boy, but privacy is a luxury you don't have. The smallest slip on your part could easily change the outcome of this war. Of course, I'm here to guide you, but if you don't confide in me..."

"There's nothing to tell."

"I'd like to believe that. Truly, I would. And yet for weeks now, I've watched you carry unusual amounts of food into your quarters. Just last night, I watched you order a meal that could only be described as a romantic dinner. And then there are the biscuits you don't like, large supplies of tea bags even though I know for a fact that you prefer coffee. But it isn't just that."

"Indeed?" Severus said, gritting his teeth. "What else?"

"Your moods, for one. Your appearance."

"My *appearance*?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Taking much better care of yourself these days. Freshly showered every morning, dressed in your nicest robes..."

"So?"

"Has to be a reason for it."

Severus was sick of these interrogations, to the point where he was on the verge of telling the truth. Not all of it, of course — he'd rather die than expose Lily's secret to a man he had little reason to trust. But maybe if he went with a somewhat modified version, it would be enough to alleviate Dumbledore's suspicions? Well, it was worth a try.

"Fine," he said, letting out an exaggerated sigh. "Yes, I'm... seeing someone. But I don't keep her here. She's..."

"Why the extra food?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Surely you haven't forgotten that I can Disapparate from any part of the castle I wish? Didn't take me long to figure out that included my own quarters. When I'm finished for the day, I visit my companion. I bring her something to eat, spend an hour or two in her company, and then I return to my duties. I hardly see where this is problematic."

Dumbledore remained silent for a long moment, scrutinizing his expression. "How much have you told her?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Oh, I hardly believe that. Whoever this woman is, it's clear that you care about her... no, don't try to deny it. It couldn't be more obvious, Severus. Love is a wonderful thing, but it makes us vulnerable. No one knows that better than you do. How can you be sure she's not a spy, that she isn't feeding information..."

"Because she's a Muggle."

"I see." Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, his expression inscrutable. "Yes, I suppose that would be the safest choice. But if anyone on the other side found out..."

"The Dark Lord knows."

"Does he? Interesting. I'd hardly think he approves of such entanglements."

"On the contrary. He has no issue with Muggles being used for... carnal purposes, as long as we do not breed with them. Indeed, he commends me for my actions, believing I'm much

more brutal than I am. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that I'm quite capable of pulling off such a deception. The position you've placed me in with the students stands as proof of that."

"So why keep it a secret?" Dumbledore said, switching tactics. "If this arrangement is as harmless as you claim, why go to so much trouble to hide it? Are you ashamed to be involved with a Muggle?"

"No. I simply prefer to keep my private life private. Considering how long you've known me, this should hardly come as a surprise."

"Perhaps not. Still, that makes another interesting point. I've known you for quite some time, as you pointed out. Nearly all your life. Which is how I'm certain you've only ever loved one woman, that you've remained loyal to her memory. Commendably so."

"What," Severus said, burying his head in his hands, "is your point?"

"Just that it seems out of character for you to give so much of yourself to another. It wasn't even a year ago that you stood here in this very office, casting your Patronus. A lovely doe, as I recall, though if you've developed feelings for another..."

"I never said I was in love with the Muggle. You assumed..."

"Based on a fair amount of evidence, I assure you. Still, there's an easy way to settle this. Show me your Patronus."

Severus froze. "No."

"Why not?"

Why not? Because of course, it would prove he'd been in love with the same woman all along. It would make it clear that his change in mood had nothing to do with some amorous entanglement with a Muggle. And really, Dumbledore was right — he'd been careless about his behavior, at least within the confines of this office. Just the fact that he must look reasonably content when he emerged from his quarters in the morning would be enough to cause suspicion.

But that didn't explain why Dumbledore was so interested in seeing his Patronus. Just to prove he had feelings for someone else? No, it wasn't that simple. There was a strange light in the old man's eyes, an almost palpable tension in his movements as he leaned forward in his chair.

"Severus?"

"I'm not showing you my Patronus," he said stiffly. "Nor will I respond to any further questions of a private nature. Now if you'll excuse me..."

"Wait!"

"Oh, let him go, you old busybody," Phineas snapped. "You've already forced a confession out of him, and a shameful one at that. Fornicating with a *Muggle*... do you really think any self-respecting Slytherin would admit to such a thing if it wasn't the truth?"

"With all due respect, Phineas, you don't understand..."

The rest of Dumbledore's words were lost as Severus slipped behind the tapestry, entering his quarters with a sigh of relief.

## 56. Shattering

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### Chapter 56: Shattering

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Over the next few weeks, their lives settled into a strange routine, caught somewhere between serenity and upheaval. Beyond their quarters was a world of constant stress, a precarious situation that threatened to erupt into open rebellion at any moment. Yet somehow, Severus managed to keep the situation under control, falsifying terrible punishments to conceal his acts of mercy.

Unfortunately, there was only so much he could do about the Carrows. Their brutal discipline was par for the course these days, fully supported by the master they served. Still, he found ways to intervene, shielding the children whenever he could get away with it without blowing his cover.

In this, Charity had proven to be a useful ally, interrupting their dinner one night to deliver an urgent message.

*Hufflepuff boy up on the sixth floor. Needs help.*

“What happened?” Lily had asked her.

*Bastard cursed him. Stuffed him in an alcove, told him he’d just have to stay there till morning. But he’s losing a lot of blood, and...*

“Where?”

*At the end of the hall, next to the painting of Hogsmeade.*

Lily had repeated the information to Severus, who’d yanked on his boots, hurrying from the room without a word. He’d returned about an hour later, his expression grim.

“Is he okay?”

“He’ll live,” he’d said, cleaning the blood off his hands before turning his attention to Charity. “Thank you. If you hadn’t notified me when you did...”

*Tell him it’s no problem. Happy to help.*

With that, the cat had become his eyes and ears, forever on the lookout for any signs of trouble. The only downside was that Severus was getting even less sleep than usual these days, often rising in the middle of the night to prowl the halls or tend to another injured child.

Even so, the time Lily spent with him was peaceful, a welcome escape from the madness. Long conversations and quiet dinners, making love or simply holding each other in the darkness when he was too tired to do anything else. She’d even coaxed him into the bath a couple times, rubbing the tension from his shoulders as he’d groaned in relief.



“Severus,” she’d whispered one night, gazing up at his shadowed face as he’d unfastened his trousers. “Maybe we should cast the charm.”

“What? I thought we agreed...”

“We did. But with the war, all the pressure you’re dealing with...”

“This again?” He’d sank back on his heels, letting out an exasperated sigh. “If it’s the wrong time for *you*, please feel free to say so. If you’ve changed your mind, if you don’t want...”

“I didn’t say that. I’m just worried that it’ll be too much for you.”

“Don’t be.”

He’d kissed her then, swallowing her sigh of surrender as he’d made love to her with an intensity that left her dazed in the aftermath. Somehow, that had gotten through to her more than words ever could, a ferocious determination that left no room for doubt. Whatever his reasons, he truly wanted a child. As long as she did, too, there was no argument in the world that could dissuade him.

And so the last of her worries had faded, replaced by eager anticipation. Since then, she’d made every effort to take care of herself — good food and plenty of rest, roaming through the passageways to keep herself in shape. She’d even performed a few diagnostic charms, thrilled to discover that she was perfectly healthy, her body in prime condition to carry a child.

Indeed, she’d never felt more ready. So why hadn’t it happened yet?

That question had been plaguing her for weeks, leading her to test Severus as well. But a few flicks of her wand over his sleeping body had confirmed that the problem didn’t lie with him. His stress levels were high, nutrient levels slightly low, and of course, he’d shown signs of exhaustion. But other than that, he was fine, no issues whatsoever with his reproductive functions.

“These things take time,” he’d told her, and she knew he was right. But it was hard to be patient when she wanted it so badly, even harder to pretend she wasn’t upset when it didn’t happen.

For more than a week, she’d been watching the calendar, her eyes fixed on the date she’d circled in ominous red ink. November 15. She spent half of it in the bathroom, bracing herself for a disappointment that never came.

November 16, 17, 18...

By the 19th, she was struggling to contain her excitement, reminding herself that it was far too soon to get her hopes up. But before she knew it, another three days had passed, November 22 dawning cool and clear as she sprang out of bed and hurried to the toilet.

“Are you all right?” Severus mumbled as she slipped back beneath the covers.

“I’m wonderful,” she said, giving him an enthusiastic kiss. “More than wonderful. I’m... well, I think...”

She trailed off, knowing it was too soon to tell him. Better to wait until she could test herself, which she'd be able to do in a few more days. And then once she knew for sure...

Unable to help herself, she grinned.

"What is it?" he asked, dark eyes alighting with curiosity.

She pressed her body against his, sliding her hand under the blanket to caress his bare chest. "I think I'm going to have my way with you. Right now."

It was an awkward save, but he didn't seem to mind, sucking in a sharp breath as she moved to straddle him. Realizing he was already fully aroused, she didn't bother with preliminaries, taking him deep inside her with a soft moan.

"God, Lily..."

Slowly, she rocked her hips, leaning forward to surround him with a curtain of brilliant hair as she gazed into his eyes. She'd never felt more connected with him than she did just then, imagining the child that might already be growing inside her. And in that moment, hope gave way to certainty, the intensity of her emotions too strong to believe otherwise.

Pregnant. Yes, she had to be. How could it feel so *real* if she wasn't?

"Severus, I..." She trailed off, gasping as wave after wave of pure pleasure rippled through her. But even then, some distant part of her remembered the need for secrecy, her lips brushing his ear as she whispered a different confession.

"I love you."

That was all it took to push him over the edge, his face buried against her neck as he let out a muffled groan. For several long moments, he held her close, the bedroom silent aside from the sound of his harsh, rasping breaths.

And then finally, he spoke, his voice unsteady. "Me too."

Closing her eyes, she sighed in contentment, lulled by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. She couldn't recall the last time she'd felt so comfortable, so safe and utterly loved, her thoughts as soothing as a lullaby as she surrendered to the gentle darkness.

"Shit. I have to go."

Her eyes snapped open, her voice almost petulant as she said, "Now? It's Saturday."

"I know," he said quietly, easing her off him before he reached for his trousers. "But I have to supervise a detention in half an hour. Unless I want Alecto to do it, which..." He scowled, shaking his head as he pulled on his robes. "I also need to meet with the Slytherins today. I'm supposed to assess the strength of their loyalties, whatever that entails. And then there's the paperwork, not to mention..."

"I'll miss you."

He stopped in his tracks, dropping his boots with a thud as he headed back over to the bed. Taking her face between his hands, he pressed his lips to hers before pulling away with a reluctant sigh.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

As soon as he was gone, she laid back down, attempting to recapture the drowsy state of bliss from a few minutes before. But she was wide awake now, the bed seeming cold and empty without him. Sighing in resignation, she sat up, one hand resting absently on her stomach as she pushed the covers off her legs.

“No. Oh, no...”

She pressed her hand to her mouth, snatching the blankets back up in a desperate attempt to hide the evidence. But she could feel it beneath her now, couldn’t block out the vision of that dark smear that had seared itself into her brain. Just a small stain, but still proof that she wasn’t pregnant after all, that she’d been a fool to delude herself into believing otherwise.

Laying her head back down, she wept quietly into the pillow, trying to figure out why she felt like such a failure. It had only been a couple months, hadn’t it?

And then suddenly, she understood why it was hitting her so hard, the silent fear she hadn’t dared to acknowledge. Everything she’d been through — those long years as an animal, the resurrection spell that had brought her back? The body she had now hadn’t come from a natural source. No, it was the product of a magical process she barely understood, nothing short of a miracle.

But what if that miracle had limitations? What if she wasn’t even capable of carrying a child?

Granted, the diagnostic charms had said she was healthy, but they hadn’t been designed for a situation like hers, had they? No, there were no tests that would give her certainty, nothing to help her find the answers she needed.

What she *needed* was definite proof, the reality of a child growing inside her.

And that was why she’d been so anxious to get pregnant, why it was such a crushing disappointment when it didn’t happen. If she’d been able to trust her body, had felt sure it would happen sooner or later, it would’ve been easier to relax. But to keep trying month after month, only to realize that all their efforts were futile? Just the thought of that was devastating.

She cried until her head ached, tears streaming down her cheeks until she had none left to give. When she finally got up, she felt drained, her dull, persistent cramps seeming like an added insult as she trudged off to take a hot bath. She felt a bit better after that, helped by a sandwich and a mild pain potion. But her worries, her fears... now that she’d acknowledged their existence, there was no escaping them. She paced the study for what seemed like hours, hardly knowing what to do with herself. And then at last, she dropped onto the couch, reaching for the book she’d left on the table.

*Magical Reproduction: A Comprehensive Guide for Witches and Wizards*  
*Chapter 1: The Intricacies of Contraception*

*Taken as a whole, witches and wizards who wish to conceive should have little trouble doing so. As long as both partners are of the proper age and reasonably healthy, indulging in frequent copulation should be the only requirement.*

Copulation? She snorted, pouring herself a cup of tea before she continued.

*However, there are a few notable exceptions. Purebloods who are close relations face more of a challenge, as do those who mate with Muggles. (Note: the author has no moral objection to the latter. She simply wishes to point out that Muggles often encounter health issues which are not shared by their magical counterparts. For a brief listing of these, please consult the appendix at the back of this book.)*

*There are an assortment of other situations that should be mentioned. For example, Dragon Pox is known to reduce fertility in even the most virile wizard if not treated promptly. Furthermore, a small listing of potions can interfere with reproductive functions, including those which are used for contraception...*

"No kidding." Lily rolled her eyes, flipping to the next page.

*Fertility potions can often be helpful, especially when taken during a witch's menstrual cycle or soon thereafter. As these potions stay in the system for approximately three weeks...*

Turning the page, she scanned the instructions, confident that the potion wouldn't be too difficult to brew. But of course, that wasn't the problem.

Should she ask Severus? If she explained what a hard time she was having, why she needed to know as soon as possible, he'd make it for her. No question of that. He'd hate the thought of her agonizing over it month after month, probably even more than she did.

On the other hand, he had too much to do already. How could she ask him to spend hours making a potion when he barely had time to eat or sleep? Besides, how would he feel when she told him the truth? Guilty as hell, no doubt. He'd probably decide it was his fault, blaming himself for convincing her to have a child in the first place.

No, no need to put him through that. Not when there was an alternative.

She had access to his private lab now, didn't she? Yes, not to mention plenty of free time on her hands. Why *shouldn't* she do it herself? She could brew the potion and be back in their quarters within a couple of hours. If it worked, he'd never know the difference. If it didn't?

Well, she wasn't ready to think about that just yet.

She made a copy of the instructions and headed for the bedroom, pulling on a set of pale blue robes. Hesitating, she wondered if she should wait for Charity. That would definitely be the safer option, since the cat would be able to warn her if Severus was coming.

On the other hand, she had no way of knowing when or even *if* Charity would show up. Besides, Severus had made it clear that he had a busy day ahead of him — he wasn't likely to make it back to their quarters until late that evening.

Decision made, Lily ducked into the passageway, walking at a brisk pace until she reached a smaller corridor she recognized from her previous trip to the dungeon. When she reached the end, she pressed the tiny button, waiting none too patiently as the wall slid away to reveal the lab.

Suddenly, she was glad she hadn't asked Severus to do this for her. Now more than ever, she needed to do something for herself, to feel she had some measure of control over her own fate. And the chance to brew again... to use a talent that had lain dormant for so many years?

She felt her sadness draining away, replaced by quiet anticipation as she stepped into the room.

“*Accio Nux Myristica*,” she whispered, smiling as a vial flew off the shelf and landed in her hand. “*Accio Honeywater. Accio Knotgrass*.” Catching the jars, she set them on the counter, crossing her fingers as she called for the final ingredient.

“*Accio Ptolemy?*”

Ptolemy was much less common than the others, a highly valuable substance that was only used in a handful of potions. But just as she started to wonder how she was supposed to manage without it, a tiny bottle slipped off the topmost shelf, dropping into her open palm.

“Thank you, Severus,” she whispered, sighing in relief.

Cleaning the dust off a small pewter cauldron, she reached for the Honeywater, measuring out a small portion before chopping up the recommended amount of Knotgrass. She added both to the cauldron and applied a bit of heat, watching with bated breath as the liquid turned bright yellow. Seven stirs anticlockwise followed by a pinch of Nux Myristica... and then there was nothing to do but wait, setting the potion to simmer for the next half hour.

Finally, there was a telltale popping sound, informing her that she’d made it to the final stage.

“Three drops of Ptolemy. Stir 42 times clockwise, six times anticlockwise.”

At one point, she panicked, unable to remember whether she was on the 33rd stir or the 34th. Deciding it was the latter, she stirred eight more times before switching directions, smiling in triumph as the potion turned a rich shade of green.

Satisfied, she poured out the proper amount, wrinkling her nose as she took it down in a single swallow. And then she ducked into the passageway, anxious to get back before Severus realized she was gone.

“Hello!”

She nearly screamed, dropping her wand as the ghost materialized in front of her.

“Nick! Must you sneak up on people like that?”

“My apologies,” he said, bowing with a flourish. “Really, it’s almost a pity I don’t have any chains to drag around. It would be much easier to warn others of my approach. Did I ever tell you about the time...”

Flashing him a distracted smile, Lily reached down to grab her wand. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I need to get back. Don’t want to get caught, you know.”

“Oh, no need to worry about that. He’s just settled in to have a talk with Dumbledore. Erm, Dumbledore’s *portrait*, that is.”

She frowned. “About what?”

“Harry.”

“*Harry?*”

“Yes. Your son, you know.”

“Obviously.” Unable to help herself, she rolled her eyes. “What I mean is... well, can you tell me what they’re saying? Has there been any news?” She tried to scoot past him, biting her lip in frustration as he continued to block her path. Of course, she could’ve passed right through him, but just the thought of it sent a chill up her spine.

Meanwhile, his expression had changed, more guarded now. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“I’m sworn to secrecy.”

“But Dumbledore’s dead. Surely you don’t have to...”

Letting out a chuckle, he shook his head. “I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way. If it did, I could share intimate secrets about the Hogwarts staff spanning 500 years. Useless information in most cases, but it *would* liven up my parties — no pun intended.”

“Fair enough,” she responded with a polite laugh, making another attempt to duck around him. “I’ll just find out for myself then.”

“Surely you already know?”

“Know what?”

“Well, I can’t say it.”

“Then how can you expect me to have any idea what you’re talking about?”

“Hmmm,” he said, his head wobbling as he shrugged. “Just seems like one of those things that should be obvious.”

“What, that You-Know-Who is after Harry? That he’s in hiding? Yes, everyone knows that. And yes, I know Dumbledore wants him to be the one to kill You-Know-Who. I still don’t understand why, but...”

Nick gave her a strange look. “But you know about the Hor...” He let out a choking sound, as if something was physically preventing him from finishing the sentence.

“I know about the Horcruxes. Harry’s supposed to destroy them, though I can’t see why he has to do that either. Now if you’ll excuse me...”

“Wait!”

Nick looked panicked now, holding out his arms in an effort to stop her, though of course, he didn’t have that power. And then the truth hit her full force, the realization that there was some piece of crucial information she *didn’t* know... something that was being discussed at that very moment.

Without another word, she brushed past Nick, only distantly realizing that he was still following her as she hurried along the passageway. Up through the castle, straight into the Headmaster’s quarters and into the bathroom, jamming the button to a path that would lead her straight past the office.

“Lily, wait!”

She spun around, shocked to see him hovering over the bathtub until she remembered that Dumbledore had granted him full permission to enter these rooms. Nick hadn't abused the privilege until now, had promised her that he never would. Clearly, this was an exception, though chiding him for it was the last thing on her mind. She'd already slipped into the other passageway, a dozen swift footsteps echoing in the darkness until she came to an abrupt standstill.

Holding her breath, she inched closer to the crack, drawn by the murmur of voices on the other side of the wall. But before she could make out a single word, Nick burst into song.

"Stop that!" she hissed.

In response, he only sang louder, making a terrible racket.

"Damn it. Do you want to bring the entire castle down on us?"

"Oh, them," he said, his expression smug. 'They can't hear a thing. Here, I'll prove it.' He pressed his face against the wall, shouting, "Headmaster Snape! Guess who I've got back here?"

*"Nick!"*

But as he lapsed into silence, she realized that Severus was still talking to Dumbledore, his voice low and intense.

"See?"

"Fine," she said, feeling a little calmer. "Now will you be quiet so *I* can hear?"

He flashed her an apologetic smile before launching into a bawdy tune. "Let me tell you about a fair maiden from Hufflepuff. Tried to stick a wand straight up her..."

*"Silencio!"*

Shaking his head frantically, he caught it in his palm as it toppled off to one side. He stuck it back on his neck before moving closer, staring at her with pleading eyes. But she only turned away, waving a dismissive hand as she pressed her ear against the crack.

"... has to be something we can do."

"I already told you, Severus. This is the only way."

"If we could isolate the Horcrux. Remove it somehow..."

"Do you think I never thought of that? That I didn't explore every possible alternative?"

*"Did you?"*

"Of course I did," Dumbledore shot back, sounding affronted. "As if I would've even considered such a plan if..."

"Fine," Severus interrupted. "But that still doesn't explain why I must wait until the last possible moment to tell him. Shouldn't we give him time to reconcile himself to his fate?"

"You really *have* come to care for the boy, haven't you?"

"I hardly see where that is relevant. I'm simply saying..."

“Well, at least you don’t deny it this time.”

Severus let out an exasperated sigh. “Can we get back to the point?”

“And what point would that be?”

“He deserves to know the truth.”

“What Harry *deserves* and what it’s going to take to win this war are two different things, I’m afraid. Do you remember what I told you? I said you must wait until it is absolutely necessary...”

“Otherwise, how could he have the strength to do what he must do?”

“Very good,” Dumbledore said. “What I meant by that was...”

“You were suggesting that he must be lured into a situation where he has no other choice. You mean to blindside him, conceal the truth until there’s only one possible outcome. Wouldn’t want to risk him running away, would you?”

“I didn’t mean...”

“I think you underestimate him,” Severus cut in, his voice quiet. “You assume he won’t go through with it if he knows his fate in advance. I disagree. The boy has his share of flaws, but a lack of courage isn’t one of them.”

“You misunderstand...” Dumbledore paused, the defensiveness in his voice giving way to speculation. “Why, Severus, that almost sounded like a compliment.”

“Compliment? No. A simple statement of fact.”

“A fact you’ve never stated before. You always said he was lazy, arrogant...”

“Did I ever call him a coward?”

There was a long pause. “No, not that I recall.”

“Precisely,” Severus said. “At any rate, it hardly matters *when* we tell him. He’ll go through with it either way, I assure you.”

“What brings you to that conclusion?”

“A consistent pattern of behavior that proves it? Reckless or not, that boy has never been the type to shrink from a challenge.”

“So the flaw becomes an asset,” Dumbledore said, sounding thoughtful. “Interesting.”

“Again, I’m merely stating facts. I don’t believe it’s necessary to withhold...”

“Severus, it’s not a question of Harry’s courage. I’m afraid it’s not that simple. There are certain... factors that cannot fall into place until the proper moment, factors which will determine the outcome of this war. Courageous or not, he’ll be facing a fearsome opponent, the most powerful Dark wizard in living memory. He needs every advantage we can give him.”

“Letting the Dark Lord slaughter him like a pig? I’d hardly call that an advantage.”



“Harry *must* die, Severus. There’s no getting around that, unless you wish to see the destruction of our world. If we don’t take this chance...”

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The rest of the words were lost as Lily sank to the ground, burying her head in her hands. She didn’t know how long she sat there, time seeming frozen as she struggled to process what she’d just heard. Only when the ghost knelt beside her, gesturing helplessly, did she come back to herself somewhat, hoping her legs wouldn’t give out as she pushed herself to her feet.

Nick was still silent — she hadn’t thought to lift the charm. But gradually, she realized she couldn’t hear anything else either, her eyes growing wide as she pressed her ear against the crack. Nothing. No noise, not a breath of movement. She turned her head to peer through the opening, dismayed to find herself staring at an empty office.

Of course, Severus could’ve gone somewhere else. He might’ve headed downstairs, or perhaps he’d been summoned. But deep down, she knew where he was, her breath coming in short, frantic bursts as she raced down the passageway toward the tiny silver button.

It was too late. Even as she drew close to their quarters, she could hear him calling her name on the other side of the wall, his voice hoarse with panic. Pounding on the button, she stumbled through the opening, colliding with something warm and solid as strong arms reached out to catch her.

His body was rigid with tension, his heart thudding wildly as he crushed her to his chest. And then abruptly, he broke away, dark eyes blazing with fury.

“Where the *hell* have you been?”

## 57. Caught in the Act

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### Chapter 57: Caught in the Act

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For several long moments, Lily said nothing, refusing to meet his eyes. She stared down at the floor instead, her hands visibly shaking as she reached back to brace herself against the counter.

“Well?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know where you’ve *been*?” Severus sneered, caught between heart wrenching fear and impotent fury. “Imperiused, were you? Hit by a Confundus Charm?”

“No.”

“No,” he agreed. “Of course not. No one could’ve touched you here. Which means...”

“I never said...”

“*Which means* you knew exactly what you were doing. You *chose* to leave these rooms, putting not only yourself but the entire Wizarding world at risk. Why?”

“I don’t...”

“Why, Lily? Why would you do something so foolish? So reckless? How could you just...” He trailed off, breathing hard as he struggled to bring his temper under control. “And then to deny me even the courtesy of an explanation? To say that you don’t *know*?”

“Severus,” she said, her voice tremulous. “Please.”

Only then did he notice that her face was deathly pale, her expression shocked, like she’d just taken a Stunner to the chest. Strange. He might’ve expected defiance, perhaps flimsy excuses or sheepish smiles. But to see her cowering before him, trembling and oddly subdued? That wasn’t like her at all. No, it reminded him of...

In a flash, he saw an image of his mother, white faced and shaking as she braced herself for another beating.

“Stop it,” he snapped, fury mingled with pain as he put a little distance between them. “Bloody hell, I’m not going to hurt you!”

“I know that.”

“Do you? Then why...”

“Damn it,” she said, lifting her eyes to the ceiling. “If you’ll just give me a minute...”

“Time to come up with a plausible lie? Oh, I don’t think so. I want the truth, Lily. *Now*. Where were you? Where does the passage go? How long have you been using it? And don’t try to tell me this was the first time. You...” He paused, cursing under his breath. “The bloody apples. That’s how you got them, isn’t it? You’ve been lying to me for *months*.”

“Severus, you don’t understand. It isn’t...”

“It isn’t what?” he demanded when she fell silent. “Isn’t a big deal? I beg to differ. Exposing your whereabouts, putting countless lives at risk?”

Abruptly, she straightened her shoulders, meeting him stare for stare. “Oh, stop it. I didn’t *expose* myself. I was extremely careful, wouldn’t have done it if anyone could’ve seen me. I’m not stupid, you know.”

“Under the circumstances, I’d say that’s debatable.”

He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth, but it was too late to take them back. Her eyes widened and then narrowed into slits, her lips twisting into a scowl.

“You arrogant son of a...”

Sighing, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m not calling *you* stupid. Your *actions*, on the other hand...”

“I told you I was careful. I *told* you...”

“Then tell me this: if you didn’t see anything wrong with your behavior, why go to so much trouble to hide it?”

She hesitated, then shrugged. “I didn’t want to worry you. Besides, I was afraid you’d forbid it, no matter how safe the passages were.”

“*Passages*? You’re telling me there’s more than one?”

“Five.”

“Fuck.”

“They’re perfectly safe, Severus. I made sure of that.”

He pushed himself away from the wall, pacing the confines of the bathroom. “That’s hardly the point. The *point* is that you lied to me. Repeatedly.”

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t want to...”

“Upset me,” he said with a sneer. “Yes, I gathered that. You decided it was kinder to keep it to yourself. Or more convenient? I imagine that’s closer to the truth. Nevermind that your secrecy could have had devastating consequences. Nevermind that I would’ve ripped the castle apart if I hadn’t been able to find you, could’ve easily blown my cover.”

“I didn’t mean...”

He silenced her with a scathing look. “You betrayed my trust, Lily. That’s all that matters. Whatever your motivations, the fact remains that you deceived me. You didn’t give a fuck...”

His head snapped to one side, followed by an explosion of pain. He stared at her, stunned, ears ringing so loudly from the slap that he could barely hear the words that followed. But then her voice grew louder, filled with barely controlled fury.

“How *dare* you? To stand here and accuse me of... when *you*...”

“When I *what*?” he shot back, tasting blood on the inside of his cheek. “What convoluted logic would suggest that *you’re* the victim here? *You* lied to *me*, *you*...”

“Yes, I *did* lie. I lied because being shut up all the time was driving me crazy. I lied because I needed to make a few choices for myself. I *chose* to use the passages, yes. Because I knew they were safe. Because I had no intention of getting caught. Because I’m a grown woman, and I shouldn’t have to ask permission...”

“I see,” he said slowly. “So in your estimation, I didn’t deserve to have a say in the matter?”

“I’m saying that it’s hard to trust someone who doesn’t trust me in return.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re the one who makes all the decisions, Severus. I’m hidden away up here because *you* think it’s for the best.” She paused, sucking in a deep breath. “If I’d told you about the passages, what would you have done? Would you have trusted my judgment? Would you have even *considered*...”

“*We’re in the middle of a bloody war!*” he burst out, slamming his hand down on the counter. “I’m a fucking traitor, and you might as well have a target painted on your back! Blaming me for your lack of freedom... do you think this is what I *want*?”

“You make these choices *for* me,” she said quietly. “Not *with* me.”

“If I do, it’s only because I have a better understanding of the situation. You have no idea...”

“Exactly,” she interrupted. “All I know is what you tell me. I’m not given much of a choice in that either, am I? I’m expected to sit here like some helpless bystander, accepting whatever scraps of information you choose to toss my way.”

“I showed you my memories, Lily. I...”

“Yes, well, you obviously chose to leave a few things out.”

He stared at her, nonplussed. “Like what?”

For an endless moment she remained silent, her composure giving way to the pale, shaken creature who’d unnerved him so much before. She bit her lip to stop it from trembling, closing her eyes as she slumped against the wall.

And then finally, she spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. “Harry.”

He felt the color drain from his face. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Swallowing hard, he said, “How?”

"I heard you talking to Dumbledore's portrait. He said that Harry... that Harry has to die. That *you* have to be the one to tell him. And you... well, you didn't exactly sound shocked."

"I... I had no idea what he was planning. Not until recently."

"Last spring?"

Hesitating, he let out a heavy sigh. "Yes."

"So you've known for the better part of a year. You *knew*, and you never bothered to tell me. Not even when you... you *promised*, Severus! You *swore* you'd let me know if he was in danger, that..."

Without thinking, he reached out to touch her shoulder, jerking his hand back as she slapped it away.

"And then to stand here and accuse me of betraying *your* trust?" she continued, her voice choked. "All because I wanted to get out for a walk every now and then?"

"Lily..."

"I'm not sorry, you know," she said, her eyes fierce as they finally met his. "About the passages, I mean. Otherwise, I might've never known. It's true, isn't it? You never had any intention of telling me."

"I did," he said quietly. "I *tried*. The thought of causing you that much pain..."

"Better to let me be blindsided then?"

"No. I didn't..." He sighed, resting his head against the wall. "I knew I needed to tell you. I was just trying to find the right way to do it."

"*The right way*? Dumbledore wants to send my only child to his *death*! Do you honestly think there's *anything* you could've said to soften that blow?"

"Perhaps not, but..."

"I didn't need you to protect my feelings, Severus. I *needed* to know the truth." She paused to take a shuddering breath. "What I needed was fair warning. A chance to come to terms with the idea, to figure out what I wanted to *do* about it!"

"There's nothing you *can* do, Lily. This is the only way."

"No, it isn't."

"Dumbledore..."

"*Dumbledore can go to hell!*" she shouted. "Harry is *my* child, not his! If he — if *either* of you — think I'll just stand aside and let this happen, you are sadly mistaken!"

"Whatever you think of Dumbledore, this isn't what he wants. I can assure you of that. If there was any alternative..."

"He would've figured it out by now?" Her lip curled into a sneer. "Dumbledore doesn't know everything, Severus. Not even close. Who was it that defeated You-Know-Who the first time around? Him? I don't think so."

"That was a completely different situation."

"How?"

He sat down on the edge of the tub, burying his head in his hands. "The boy has a Horcrux inside him. You cannot save him without doing the same for the Dark Lord. Even if I was willing to let you sacrifice yourself..."

"Let me?"

"Yes. I have no intention of *letting* you die, Lily. Certainly not in vain."

"And why," she said, her teeth clenched, "do you think that's *your* choice to make?"

"Because," he said quietly. "I... I love you. You can't expect me not to do everything in my power to keep you safe."

"And I love Harry. So how can you expect *me*..."

"There's nothing you can do to save him."

"That's what I thought, too. All those years ago in Godric's Hollow. I had no reason to believe that letting You-Know-Who kill me would make a damn bit of difference. Do you think that mattered? That I could've just stood aside and watched my son die?"

"Of course not, but..."

"But you knew that all along, didn't you?" she continued, as if she hadn't heard him. "You *knew* how I'd react. That's the real reason you didn't tell me."

"Lily..."

She shook her head, her voice catching on a sob. "It wasn't about protecting my feelings, was it? You were trying to prevent me from *acting* on them. You didn't want me to find out the truth. Not until it was too late... until you knew there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it."

"No, I..." But then he trailed off, realizing she was right.

"No chance to hope, to look for a solution myself, even if I never found one. If nothing else, the chance to say goodbye before I lost him. And all for what? Just to keep me *alive*?"

"I couldn't lose you. Not again."

She sniffled, turning her face away. "Right. This is about *your* feelings. Not mine. You didn't care what it would do to me, did you? How awful it would've been to spend the rest of my life wondering if I could've stopped it if I'd only known sooner?"

"You can't..."

"No, don't tell me there's nothing I can do. Even if that's true, I needed to figure that out for myself. Can't you see that? Can't you understand that that's the only thing that would've given me any peace? You wouldn't even give me the chance to *try*, you..."

She trailed off, her shoulders shaking, the last of her composure slipping away as she buried her face in her hands.

And then suddenly, he *did* understand, remembering all those wretched years before she'd come back. The way he'd blamed himself for her death, for delivering that fucking prophecy even though he'd done so in ignorance. All those nights of misery and self-loathing, wondering if he might've saved her if he'd acted differently. And most of all, how it had nearly destroyed him to leave her fate in someone else's hands, helpless to prevent the coming catastrophe.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath, but it was too late. She'd already left the bathroom, slamming the door behind her with a resounding thud. He jerked it open, only to hear a second slam as she shut herself in the bedroom.

"Lily?"

He could hear her crying on the other side of the door, twisting the knob before he realized she'd warded it against him. A futile effort in his own quarters — he could've easily blown the shield apart if he'd chosen to do so. But the crux of her distress, how powerless she obviously felt... he couldn't bring himself to obliterate whatever defenses she had left.

Yes, perhaps it was better to leave her alone, at least for the time being. Besides, he needed a chance to collect his thoughts, to figure out how in the hell he'd let it come to this. He'd only wanted to protect her, had been willing to do whatever it took to keep her safe. But in the process, he'd blinded himself to the truth.

The truth was that he *had* stripped her of her power, even if that had never been his intention. Sheltering her the way he had, keeping the most distressing information to himself... all along, that had seemed like the right course of action, for her sake as well as his own. He'd never stopped to consider that this was her war, too, that she had every right to be a part of it.

But it wasn't that simple, was it? Even if he was willing to let her endanger herself, a concept he rejected with his entire being, there were other factors to consider. If the Dark Lord knew she was alive, that he'd been hiding her all along, they'd *both* be killed. And then the boy would die anyway, and all his efforts would be in vain. No, he couldn't let her...

"*You make these choices for me,*" she'd said. "*Not with me.*"

Sighing heavily, he headed for the study, grabbing a bottle of firewhiskey off the bookshelf.

"*It's hard to trust someone who doesn't trust me in return.*"

She was right. He could see that now. He'd *never* trusted her, had he? No... he'd deliberately kept her in the dark, refusing to even discuss certain matters or let her be a part of his decisions. And in that, too, she'd been correct — he hadn't done it just to spare her feelings. No, he'd been afraid of her *reactions*, terrified that she'd do something reckless and get herself killed.

Protection. Yes, that had been his primary motivation. It hadn't even occurred to him that in the end, keeping secrets might be far more damaging than telling her the truth.

After all, if he'd confided in her to begin with, she would've had no reason not to trust him. He could've reasoned with her and she might've listened, taking his opinions under consideration before doing anything rash. But now?

Now he had no idea how to make it right, terrified that he'd already lost her. If she decided to leave... well, he did have the power to put the castle on lockdown, could probably find the bloody passages and seal them off. But in the end, could he bring himself to do that?

No. Whatever the cost, he knew he couldn't hold her here. Not against her will. His only hope was that she'd be willing to hear him out, that somehow, she'd find it in her heart to give him another chance.

Otherwise... well, he wasn't ready to think about that just yet.

Dropping onto the couch, he conjured a glass, filling it to the brim with rich amber liquid. But just as he lifted it to his lips, the Dark Mark started to burn.

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"*Fuck!*" Lily heard Severus shout from behind the wall, followed by the sound of shattering glass. But she couldn't bring herself to turn back, her heart beating frantically as she raced along the passageway. It was pitch dark — she hadn't bothered to light her wand. Only when she stumbled, her knees smacking against the cold stone floor, did she whisper "*Lumos*", her voice catching on a sob.

Not that the light helped much. Her surroundings swam in and out of focus, her vision so blurry that she could barely make out the scrapes on her palms. Frustrated, she reached up to wipe away her tears, realizing it was a futile effort as her eyes continued to spill over.

For a moment, she just sat there, wrapping her arms around her knees as she rocked back and forth. And that was the moment when it truly hit her, lingering shock replaced by harsh, unforgiving reality.

Harry was going to die.

It didn't matter how she'd found out. No, not even that Severus had been the one to keep it from her, even if she felt like she could never face him again. The fact remained that her son had been set up to meet his doom, and for all her earlier bravado, she couldn't imagine how she'd be able to stop it. Dumbledore had been planning this for years, after all, had set the chain of events into motion long before she'd realized what he was doing. And considering that she didn't even know where Harry *was* at the moment...

Sniffling, she pushed herself to her feet, not caring where she was headed as she continued down the passageway. Harry... all these endless years of waiting to reveal herself to him, the agony of realizing that might never happen. The thought of him in hiding somewhere, alone and frightened, every breath he took bringing him closer to the terrible fate that awaited him. Would he recognize the truth before the end? Would he know that it had been Dumbledore, the man he'd trusted most, who'd set him up to die?

Barely aware of what she was doing, Lily reached out to press the button, not surprised when the wall slid away to reveal an alcove hidden by a crimson tapestry. Gryffindor Tower. Of course. It was the only place that made sense when instinct was guiding her footsteps, not conscious choice. This was the part of Hogwarts where she felt closest to Harry, after all, as if she might peek around the drapery and see him running up the stairs.



But that wasn't going to happen. Not now, and not ever again. Even if by some miracle, he managed to survive, he was grown now, both his innocence and his school years behind him.

With that thought, she slumped against the wall and wept... not for what was yet to come, but what had already been lost. All those times she hadn't been able to protect him, all the harsh realities she'd been helpless to shield him from. Even when he'd been right here at Hogwarts, what had she been able to do? Nothing.

What right did she have to expect that this time would be any different?

Immediately, she rejected the thought, despair giving way to anger. She wasn't an animal anymore, incapable of raising a wand in her son's defense. She had her humanity now, along with considerable magical talent. It might be easy to forget that these days, the natural result of spending so many years in the shadows. But deep down, she knew she was in full possession of her powers, that no one could stop her if she chose to...

To do what? Leave Hogwarts and go searching for Harry? Part of her wanted to do just that. So what if it meant putting herself in danger, perhaps even getting herself killed? Wouldn't it be worth the risk? To have a chance to protect him, to take both their fates into her own hands...

"No," she said out loud, startling herself.

No... as much as she loved her son, this wasn't the time to do anything rash. She might be able to save him, but at what cost? And what about Severus? If it meant endangering him, too...

Lily never noticed the shadow as it approached, nor did she hear the sharp intake of breath from just a few feet away. Nothing... not until a brisk voice commanded her to show herself, a blast of cold air hitting her in the face as the tapestry was snatched aside.

"Who are... *Merlin's beard!*"

"Hello, Minerva."

## 58. Vindication

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### Chapter 58: Vindication

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*Obliviate her*, whispered a voice in the back of Lily's mind. *Now!*

Minerva opened and closed her mouth, pressing a hand to her chest. She might've been a formidable witch under normal circumstances, but at the moment, it was Lily who had the advantage. Just one little flick...

*Do it!*

"You," Minerva sputtered, her eyes wide. "You look just like..."

"Lily Evans." Sighing, Lily lowered her wand, shoving it back in her pocket. "Yes, I know."

"Potter."

"What?"

Minerva cleared her throat, regaining a little composure. "Lily Potter. Her name was Lily Potter."

"Yes, well..." What was the point in stressing that? Wasn't there more to her identity than the brief time she'd spent as James's wife? Lily shook her head, pushing her irritation away. "Whatever you prefer."

"Are you a relative? No, that can't be it. She was Muggle-born, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Yes, of course she was. So who are you? Why are you here?"

"Minerva," she said quietly. "It's me. Lily."

"What?!" Minerva scrutinized her features, eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Don't be absurd!"

"Listen, I know it doesn't make sense, but..."

*"Lily Potter died almost 20 years ago! What kind of fool do you take me for?"*

"If you'll just let me explain..."

"Shhh!" Minerva's head snapped to one side, her eyes widening in alarm. Lily followed the direction of her gaze, confusion giving way to panic as she heard heavy footfalls on the stairs.

"Who is it? Who's coming?"

*“Amycus!”*

“Please,” she whispered, a cold knot of dread forming in the pit of her stomach. “Don’t let him find me.”

Maybe it was the fear in her eyes that did it. Or maybe Minerva simply enjoyed having any opportunity to thwart the Carrows. Whatever the reason, there wasn’t a trace of hesitation, only a cry of surprise as Lily’s body began to shrink and contort. And then the cry gave way to a squeak, her vision plunged into darkness as she was stuffed in Minerva’s pocket.

“Any trouble up here?” muttered a gruff male voice.

“None whatsoever. Sorry to disappoint you, Amycus.”

With that, Minerva moved away, the rhythm of her gait making it clear that she was descending the stairs. The sensation was uncannily familiar, reminding Lily of all the times she’d been toted around by Severus and Hagrid, safe and warm in a nest of soft wool.

But she *wasn’t* safe, was she? No, she wouldn’t be able to scamper away this time, couldn’t simply transfer to another animal. Transfigured or not, she was very much human now... a human who had *a lot* of explaining to do.

Why hadn’t she Obliviated Minerva when she’d had the chance? She could be back in her quarters by now, or on her way out of the castle, or... well, maybe that was the problem. She’d never felt more lost than she had in that moment, hadn’t had a clue what to do. When Minerva had jerked the tapestry aside, there’d been no trace of fear. No, she’d felt... *relieved*.

Foolish, perhaps, but she was tired of being alone. She needed someone to talk to, someone other than the man who’d caused her so much grief. And while Charity would find her sooner or later, that wasn’t enough. Not now. She needed to hear the sound of someone’s voice, to gaze into a pair of human eyes. To see a comforting smile, to know that...

Her thoughts were interrupted as Minerva came to a standstill, followed by the soft click of a door as it closed behind them. And then darkness gave way to light, an impossibly large hand depositing her on a chair.

Minerva lifted her wand, then hesitated. “I don’t know who you are, but if you try anything, you’ll regret it. I assure you of that.”

Lily couldn’t answer, but she bobbed her head, hoping the gesture was understood. A flick of the wand and she writhed in her seat, whimpering in discomfort until the transformation was over.

“Now,” Minerva said, settling herself behind her desk. “I’d appreciate an explanation. The truth this time. Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I already told you who I am. I’m here because...” Lily paused, reluctant to blow Severus’s cover. “Because I had nowhere else to go.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not! I swear...”

"It's despicable, it is. Tarnishing poor Lily's memory, passing yourself off as..." Minerva trailed off, shaking her head. "What are you trying to accomplish with this little stunt of yours? Did *he* send you?"

"Who?"

"Oh, don't play the innocent. Thought you'd be able to fool us, did he? That you could lure Mr. Potter out of hiding? Well, I'm sorry to inform you..."

"Minerva," Lily said, her voice trembling with frustration. "Please. I understand why you're suspicious. If I was in your place, I would be, too. But I'm telling you the truth. I swear on... on my son's *life*..."

"You're good. I'll give you that."

"What can I do to prove it to you? Do you have a Pensieve?"

"Memories can be distorted. Falsified."

"Of course they can. But how many people can do that effectively? How many would even know about the memories I could show you? Do you think You-Know-Who knows what happened in my first Transfiguration class? How I lit my match on fire when I was trying to turn it into a needle?"

Minerva's eyes widened for the briefest moment before she scowled, shaking her head. "The Gryffindors shared that class with the Slytherins, many of whom grew up to be Death Eaters. Any one of them could have passed bits of information along to make your story more authentic."

"Okay, fine," Lily said with a shrug. "But were there any Death Eaters around when I used to come into your office? What about my second year, when I came in here crying my eyes out? I didn't go to the Hospital Wing, because..."

"Because you said you felt more comfortable with me."

"Right. You told me it was perfectly natural, that it meant I could have little witches and wizards someday. You said..."

"I remember," Minerva interrupted, sounding shaken. "Tell me something else."

"Well, there was the time I stayed after class to tell you about the fight I'd had with Marlene. You told me not to worry about her ripping my dress, and then you showed me how to transfigure another one. A white sundress with little green leaves all over the skirt? Oh, and remember when I asked you how I could get James to stop talking about Quidditch so much because it bored me to tears?"

"This isn't possible."

"You went on and on about what a noble sport it was, how important it was to recognize athletic ability. Told me to be patient with him, that he'd grow out of it sooner or later."

Minerva's face had gone chalk white, her mouth hanging open in disbelief.

"You can test me if you want. Ask me about... well, *anything*, really. I have a good memory."

“Favorite Transfiguration project?”

“Oh, that’s easy.” Lily smiled. “My fourth year extra credit project, when I transfigured a handkerchief into a blanket. Magenta and neon green, I believe? You said it was the tackiest thing you’d ever seen.”

“It *was* tacky,” Minerva said, her voice sounding choked. “Though Dumbledore was rather fond of it, as I recall.”

“Which is why I gave it to him for Christmas that year. He said it was the best...” Lily trailed off as Minerva buried her face in her hands. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Minerva lifted her head, her expression haunted. “How... how is this possible? How did it happen? Where have you been all this time?”

“I’ve been...”

“Hagrid... he saw your body...”

“Yes, I know.”

“They *buried* you!”

“I know.”

“Right next to James,” Minerva whispered. “I’ve visited your graves, I...”

“Why don’t I fix you a drink?” Lily stood up, reaching for the bottle of Ogden’s on the topmost shelf of the bookcase. Conjuring a glass, she filled it to the brim and handed it to Minerva.

“Now,” she said, fixing a second glass for herself. “Godric’s Hollow. I suppose that’s the best place to start.”

Quietly, she explained what had happened that night, starting with Voldemort’s repeated command to stand aside, followed by the spell that had transformed her into an animal.

“*Ligatis Animalia*... have you heard of it?”

Minerva shook her head, looking bewildered.

“Not surprising. Most people haven’t. It’s a protection spell, one that can only work when cast at the moment of death. The body still dies, but the soul lives on. I lived like that for years, jumping from one animal to the next, not knowing how to lift the spell or if it was even possible to do so. Honestly, I stopped believing I’d ever be human again.”

“I don’t understand. Everyone knows he gave you a chance to move out of the way, but why? And then to spare your life, even when you’d defied him?”

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Well, unless he saw some advantage in letting you live.”

“Exactly.”

Minerva frowned. “But what could you possibly do for him? He must’ve realized he was never going to win you to his side, surely.”

Lily sighed, leaning forward to refill their glasses. She'd come to the crucial moment now, knowing that if she went any further, she'd be revealing Severus's secrets as well as her own. And yet how else could she explain herself? How could she even begin to describe what she'd been through without including the one person who'd been there every step of the way? Severus... the reason Voldemort had spared her in the first place, the man who'd risked everything to give her a fighting chance. Severus, who'd wept without shame when he'd finally learned of her survival, who'd worked so hard to find the antidote. He'd never, ever given up on her... not even when he'd believed it was only a memory he served.

No, she couldn't leave him out. After all, she wouldn't even be here without him.

Unable to help herself, she started to cry.

"What is it?" Minerva said, sounding alarmed.

"Severus... he asked him..."

As soon as she uttered the name, Minerva's expression changed, her eyes blazing as her lips pressed into a thin line. "Asked him *what*?"

"To let me live... as a favor, you know. Of course, You-Know-Who never realized that..."

"Severus did this to you?!"

Lily nodded, struggling for composure. "Well, sort of. I was supposed to be his reward for delivering the prophecy... or at least, that's how he justified it at the time. But he didn't trust You-Know-Who, so he went to Dumbledore. He asked..." She trailed off, nearly jumping out of her seat as Minerva slammed her hand against the desk.

"That treacherous little *snake*! I should've known! Begged his master to spare you, did he? Found a way to trap you so he could have you all to himself! That's it, isn't it? All along, he's just been biding his time, waiting for You-Know-Who to come back and lift the curse so he could claim his prize!"

"What?" Lily blinked in confusion. "No, it wasn't like that. Listen..."

Minerva didn't seem to hear her. "But he didn't dare bring you to Hogwarts, did he? Not right away. Couldn't run the risk of Dumbledore interfering, had to wait until he'd murdered him in cold blood!"

"No, no... Severus didn't *murder* him. He didn't. Please, if you'll just let me explain..."

Minerva shook her head, giving her a pitying look. "Is that what he told you? Well, I'm hardly surprised. Too much of a coward to admit the truth."

"Severus isn't a coward!"

"My dear, there's no need to defend him anymore. I don't know how you escaped, but you're safe now. I'll contact the Order, we'll find someone to take you into hiding. Whatever happens, he'll never have a chance to hurt you again."

"You don't understand. He hasn't been hurting me, he's... he's been *protecting* me."

"Protecting you?! You're *terrified*!"

“No, I’m not.” She dried her tears, making an effort to appear more calm. “Severus isn’t the enemy, Minerva. That’s what you’re *supposed* to think, but he isn’t. It’s all an act. He’s been on our side ever since the First War, from the moment he realized I was in danger. That’s why he started working for Dumbledore, why he...”

“Are you Confunded, Lily? Imperiused?”

“What?! How can you think...” She sighed, burying her face in her hands. Fucking Dumbledore. His actions had blackened Severus’s name so effectively that there was nothing she could say to redeem him. Minerva would just assume it was a trick, that she was brainwashed or simply too traumatized to understand what she was saying. And what that implied about Severus, that Minerva thought he was even capable of... what? Torture? Rape? Abusing her without mercy until she didn’t have the strength to fight back?

She’d known Severus was hated, that everyone thought he was a traitor. But to realize how deep that loathing went, to the point where Minerva obviously believed he didn’t have a shred of humanity left in him?

“Why?” she said quietly. “What makes you think Severus would ever treat me that way? He was my best friend, he *loved* me. All along, he...”

“Until you left him for James.” Minerva paused, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, my dear. I can see why you’d fool yourself into believing the best of him. I imagine that’s how you’ve managed to cope with all of this. But he hated poor James. Surely you know that.”

“Of course he did. James was horrid to him. But the idea that he’d punish *me* for... that’s absurd!”

“Is it? I don’t think so.”

“*Absurd*,” Lily repeated with a scowl. “Look, I understand your confusion. I can’t even imagine what this must be like for you. But if you think I’m going to sit here listening to these horrible accusations, you... you don’t know him at all! If you had any *idea* how much he’s done for me... for all of us...”

“He’s a traitor, Lily. That much I do know. He *murdered*...”

“Bring me a Pensieve.”

“What?”

“A *Pensieve*. Now.”

Minerva frowned. “I don’t have one.”

“The other professors...”

“Flitwick. Yes, I believe Filius does.”

“Can you borrow it?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I could. But when I tell him what it’s for... Lily Potter. *Alive*. My word, the expression on his face...”

“No!” She reached out to clutch Minerva’s hand. “No, you mustn’t tell him. Promise me.”

“Why not? He might be able to help.”

“No, I need you to trust me on this. Please.”

Minerva hesitated, then let out a sigh. “All right, dear. I can’t say I understand it, but I don’t want to distress you any further. I’ll keep your secret. For now.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll return shortly.”

With that, Minerva swept from the room, followed by a shimmer of magic as she warded the door. To keep others out or to lock someone in? Perhaps both? Lily abandoned the thought, deciding she didn’t want to know.

Instead, she made a mental catalogue of her memories, wondering if she was doing the right thing. She knew what Dumbledore would say, perhaps even Severus, too. They’d tell her to go along with Minerva’s suspicions, to do whatever it took to keep his cover intact. Yes, even if that meant letting Minerva believe he was evil, a sadistic monster who’d terrified his victim into submission.

Sadly, that *would* be the safer option. If she gave herself over to the Order, let them hide her from Voldemort, Severus could carry on without blowing his cover.

But that would also mean abandoning him, leaving him alone in a world where he was universally despised. Worse, he’d be held responsible for yet another crime he hadn’t committed, judged not only as a murderer, but a rapist, too. The idea of letting everyone believe...

No, she couldn’t do that to him. She just couldn’t.

“Here it is,” Minerva said as she came through the door. She set the Pensieve on the desk, double checking the wards before settling herself in her chair.

“You didn’t...”

“No, I didn’t tell him. Wouldn’t have in any case, but as it happens, he wasn’t even there. Already gone to bed, I’d imagine.”

“Bed?” Lily frowned. “What time is it?”

“A little after 11.”

“Oh. You didn’t see Severus out there, did you?”

Minerva scowled. “No. I don’t think he’s even made it back yet.”

“Back from where?”

“Off at one of his meetings, I suppose.”

“He’s been summoned? Oh god...”

Minerva shrugged. “Good riddance, I’d say. What was it that you wanted to show me?”

Swallowing a rush of anxiety, Lily withdrew her wand, touching it to her temple. One after another, she withdrew her memories, arranging them carefully in the basin. She hesitated



every now and again, worried that the information she was about to reveal was too intimate, that she was betraying Severus by sharing so much. But how else was she supposed to get through to Minerva, to counter a hatred that was stronger than she could've ever imagined?

First, she traveled back to that night in Godric's Hollow, howls of anguish bringing tears to her eyes as Severus wept over her body. Next, she showed an image of him stalking through Petunia's front door, threatening dire retribution if Harry came to any harm. That was followed by various recollections from Dumbledore's office, all those times Severus had argued for stronger protections, reinforcing his vow to keep Harry safe.

As for her own journey, she shared that as well, her long years of solitude as she'd watched over her son from a distance. She revealed how she'd discovered the truth about Sirius, how relieved she'd been when she'd realized she could communicate with him. And then there was their quest to find the antidote, how it had ended in failure when she'd chosen to go back to Hogwarts with Severus. All her futile efforts to communicate with him... one last, desperate attempt as she'd etched a message into the dust on his kitchen table.

By then, she was crying again, prevented from withdrawing the next memory as Minerva laid a hand on her arm.

"You don't have to show me these things. Really, you don't."

"Yes," she said quietly. "I do."

With that, she resumed her efforts, remembering Severus's expression as he'd looked through the journal. His amazement... his tears... his solemn vow to bring her back no matter what it took. The way he'd gone out and bought those silly plastic letters to help her communicate, determined to give her a voice in whatever way he could...

And then she took a deep breath, extracting a memory that still shook her to the core. She saw herself in the guise of a spider, clinging to the hem of Severus's cloak as he'd rushed to Hogwarts in the dead of night. Yes, Minerva might believe him capable of murder, but she hadn't seen him scurrying back and forth like a madman, his features taut with worry as he'd struggled to save Dumbledore's life.

*"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"*

*"I cannot tell. Maybe a year. There's no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually, it's the sort of curse that strengthens over time."*

She lingered there for a moment, hoping Minerva would see the grief in his eyes. And then she moved on, showing brief glimpses of the conversation that had followed.

*"He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes."*

*"And if it does fall into his grasp, I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students of Hogwarts?"*

Yes, it was important to include that bit as well, to make Minerva understand that Severus had been acting on Dumbledore's orders all along. No usurpation, no mad grasp for power...

*"Ultimately, of course, there is only one thing to be done if we are to save Draco from Lord Voldemort's wrath."*

*“Are you intending to let him kill you?”*

*“Certainly not. You must kill me.”*

She lingered on that scene for a while, figuring Minerva would need a moment to recover from her shock. And then she snatched it away, returning to Spinner’s End. The Unbreakable Vow, Severus’s violent outrage when Wormtail had dared to attack her. Back to Hogwarts then, a mishmash of sleepless nights as Severus tried desperately to keep Draco from doing anything stupid. Harry’s secret meetings with Dumbledore... again, she hesitated, not sure whether she should reveal the truth about the Horcruxes. But in the end, she surrendered the memories, knowing they were a crucial part of the story.

Dumbledore’s death? No, she didn’t want to force Minerva to watch such an awful scene. What mattered now was that she understood the *reasons* for it, how much it had hurt Severus to kill a man he’d truly respected.

With that in mind, she skipped ahead to the day she’d made it back to Spinner’s End. She dropped the memory into the basin, a jarring image of a gaunt, unshaven Severus with haunted eyes. And then she moved forward again, glossing over all the failed attempts to bring her back. Finally, she saw herself in the Forbidden Forest, rising out of a massive cauldron and falling into Severus’s arms.

The rest was easy. She showed Severus caring for her during her recovery — giving her food and potions, warm clothing to wear, making sure she had a wand of her own. Really, did Minerva think he would’ve offered her the means to defend herself, possibly even attack him, if he’d been holding her prisoner?

Shaking her head, Lily moved on, showing the closeness between them, the respect and gentle affection. She didn’t reveal the more intimate aspects of their relationship, though she did show glimpses of herself sleeping in his arms, teasing him gently, smiling up at him as she kissed him goodbye. Really, there was no getting around the fact that she was in love with him. Why try to hide it?

To complete the picture, she withdrew a few more recollections... Severus rushing out of their quarters to tend to an injured child, along with the memory he’d shown her of the Death Eater meeting. She flashed back to that day in his office, watching him cast harmless spells at the children before he’d Confunded them, all designed to keep his cover intact.

And then there was only one more memory to share, an image of him carrying the cat into their quarters. She revealed the truth about Charity, all the stunning details that had been shared with her that day. How Severus had saved Charity’s life at great risk to himself... that he’d done everything in his power to thwart Voldemort’s attempts to capture Harry, only to be tortured for his efforts. Severus... nearly bleeding to death on a hillside, until his own act of mercy had brought him a little mercy in return.

Satisfied, she set her wand down before folding her hands in her lap.

“Go on,” she said softly. “Take a look.”

Hesitantly, Minerva leaned forward, dipping her face into the Pensieve.

## 59. The Fallout

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### Chapter 59: The Fallout

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A single tear trickled from the corner of Minerva's eye as she lifted her head from the Pensieve. She pressed a hand to her mouth, utterly silent aside from the sound of her shallow, rapid breath. And then at last, she spoke, her voice strained.

"I don't understand. You... Severus... how could he keep this from me?"

"He couldn't take the risk of blowing his cover," Lily said quietly. "Besides, Dumbledore made him swear..."

"No, I'm talking about *Albus*! Decades of friendship, a *lifetime* of trust! He let me *believe*..."

"I don't think he meant to hurt you. I'm sure he just..." Lily trailed off, struggling to ignore her own resentment as she searched for something comforting to say. "Just did what he thought was best."

Abruptly, Minerva rose to her feet, muttering something that made Lily's cheeks turn red as she paced the room. "He fooled me into believing Severus was a traitor. A *murderer*! When I think of all the awful things I've said over the past few months... what I could've done..."

"Severus doesn't blame you, Minerva. I know he doesn't."

"*That's not the point! I was manipulated! We all were!* Did Albus ever stop to think about the consequences? Did he?! I could've *killed* Severus! Why, just last week, I found him alone in the library. He had his nose in a book, didn't even know I was there. Do you know how easy it would've been to..."

"But you didn't," Lily interrupted, deciding not to mention that Severus had probably been well aware of Minerva's presence. "He's fine."

"Yes, well, thank Merlin for small miracles. Or big ones, I should say. If you had any *idea* how many people want him dead..."

"I know."

"And to think that I was one of them..."

Minerva lapsed into silence then, obviously struggling to process everything she'd seen. From time to time, she plunged her face back into the Pensieve, as if scrutinizing some minor detail she might've glossed over the first time around. Lily left her to it, deciding to pour them both another drink before realizing that the bottle was empty.

"There on the bookshelf. Behind the marble statue."

Lily rose to her feet, swaying precariously as she retrieved a second bottle. Minerva still looked dead sober, though of course, she was as Scottish as they came. Her hand was steady as she reached for her glass, which she accepted with a curt nod.

“Sirius.”

“What?” Lily said, choosing to fill her own cup with water.

“Sirius Black. You were able to communicate with him?”

“Yes.”

“Because he was an Animagi?”

Lily nodded.

“I see.” Minerva took a long drink. “Yet you never sought me out. All those years...”

“I’m sorry, I just... I couldn’t.”

“I would’ve done everything in my power to help you. Surely you know that.”

“I know.” Lily lowered her eyes, feeling ashamed. “It wasn’t you. Honestly. It’s just that you were so close to Dumbledore.”

“You were afraid I’d tell him.”

“Yes.”

There was a long pause, followed by a heavy sigh. “Well, I hate to say it, but you were probably right. I wouldn’t have done it to hurt you, of course, but I can’t say I would’ve taken your concerns seriously either. Refusing to trust *Albus*, of all people?”

“He wasn’t perfect,” Lily said gently. “You must’ve realized that, even back then. Didn’t it ever bother you that he was so secretive all the time, that...”

“Of course it did,” Minerva interrupted with a chuckle, though her eyes were sad. “Impossible old goat. But that didn’t mean I didn’t trust him. I always believed that when it mattered, when it *truly* mattered, he was the one person I could count on to tell me the truth.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Destroying your illusions?”

Minerva shook her head. “No, my dear. I’m glad you told me. I’d rather know the truth, even if some of it is a bit hard to swallow. Besides, it isn’t all bad, is it? You’re *alive*. Just to imagine the look on Harry’s face...”

“Stop,” Lily whispered, her eyes filling with tears. “Please.”

“What is it?”

“I... I haven’t told you everything. Not yet.”

*“Crucio.”*

Gritting his teeth, Severus braced himself, almost welcoming the curse as his nerve endings caught fire. Painful, yes, but at least he knew how to control his reactions, knew exactly what was required of him. This was familiar, predictable, easily managed as long as the curses were relatively mild. He just needed to...

*“Crucio.”*

He dropped to his knees then, knowing it was what the Dark Lord expected. It was a balance he'd perfected long ago, always careful to avoid extremes. Not responding enough would've been taken as defiance, an excuse for Voldemort to teach him a terrible lesson. On the other hand, exaggerating his suffering would've branded him a coward, earning him a merciless punishment along with a great deal of contempt.

As if prompted by the thought, the figure on the ground beside him curled into a fetal position, blubbering noisily.

“Wormtail, Wormtail...” Voldemort made a tutting sound as he loomed over the quivering body. “Easily broken, are we not? Shall I cease with my punishments then?”

“N-no, my lord.”

“Ah, then you *do* want more.”

The only response was a muffled whimper.

“Ask me. I want to hear you say it.”

“I don't...”

*“Avada...”*

“No!” Wormtail sat straight up, squealing as he held his chubby hands in front of his face. “No, I mean... yes! Punish me, please!”

Voldemort lowered his wand a fraction, his expression smug. “Well, if you insist... *Crucio.*”

Wormtail screamed, making the other Death Eaters cringe. They watched as if hypnotized, their expressions ranging from horrified to ecstatic as his body began to shake and contort. Only Severus chose to look away, sensing that this was no routine punishment. There was something lurking behind the Dark Lord's eyes, a peculiar glint that twisted his stomach in knots.

Had the others noticed? He glanced around the room before his eyes fell on Lucius, who was staring back at him with an expression of dismay. Imperceptibly, they both nodded, silently acknowledging the grim reality of their situation. And then Severus dropped his gaze, feeling unnerved as he found himself studying a pair of tightly joined hands. Narcissa's fingernails, still long and elegant, were digging into her husband's flesh, a single drop of blood standing out in sharp relief against his pale skin.

*“Crucio!”*

This time, it was Bellatrix who wailed, the pain in her voice mingled with ecstasy as she fell to the floor. She lay there writhing, eyes fluttering closed, fingers clawing at her thighs as she let out a loud, throaty moan. Fighting back a wave of nausea, Severus forced himself to look away.

“More!”

“Oh no, Bellatrix,” the Dark Lord said softly. “No, I don’t think so. You enjoy it too much. Your sister, on the other hand...”

Severus heard Lucius suck in a sharp breath, caught off guard by a surge of pity. A dangerous emotion, not one he could afford to indulge at the present time. And yet he couldn’t help himself. How awful would it be to have the woman *he* loved here beside him, helpless to intervene while she suffered under the Dark Lord’s wrath?

Lily. She’d been right, of course. He *had* been overzealous in his efforts to protect her. But to even imagine what could happen if...

His thoughts were interrupted as Voldemort snarled out another curse, followed by a sharp gasp. Severus knew Narcissa too well to expect more than that — her dignity wouldn’t allow her to cry out in earnest, no matter what horrors the Dark Lord chose to inflict upon her. A second curse brought her to her knees, the sound of her soft, desperate panting somehow even more harrowing than any screams of agony could’ve been. Trembling violently, she reached out to brace herself against the wall, a pitiful gesture that made the Dark Lord smile.

“Enough?” His wand was still pointed at her, though his eyes were fixed on Lucius, who let out a choking sound in response.

“*Cruc...*”

“Please!”

“What is it you want, Lucius? Tell me.”

“My lord, she isn’t... she hasn’t done anything, she...”

Voldemort cut him off with a low hissing sound. “Hasn’t done anything?” he echoed, drawing out each syllable. “Yes, Lucius, I couldn’t agree more. Unfortunately, that happens to be the problem.”

Lucius cringed, hand shaking as he gestured at his wife. “But... she’s been tending to the prisoners, my lord, just as you requested. She’s...”

“Lucius,” Narcissa whispered. “Don’t.”

“*Has she brought me Harry Potter?!*” Voldemort burst out, his voice cracking like a whip. “Have you — have *any* of you even come *close* to... *Crucio!*”

Lucius went down, landing next to Narcissa with a painful sounding thud. He lay sprawled on his back, limbs flailing, chest heaving with quiet sobs as his wife sniffled beside him. And then just like that, it was over, Voldemort’s malevolent eyes scanning the room for another target.

One by one they fell, more than a dozen dark cloaked figures left writhing in anguish on the hard stone floor. Only one remained upright, bracing himself for the coming ordeal as a long shadow descended on the place where he knelt, head bowed.

“Severus,” the Dark Lord hissed. “My most trusted spy. Have you brought me any useful information? Or are you like the rest of your companions, as lazy as they are incompetent?”

“My lord, I...”

Just then, Wormtail let out a yelp of dismay, followed by the pungent odor of urine. Voldemort’s head snapped to one side, bloodless lips curling in contempt.

“Forgive me, master!”

“Leave me, Wormtail!” he snapped. “Yes, and the rest of you, too. I wish to speak with Severus alone.”

Quietly, Severus watched the others depart, some limping painfully while others crawled to the door on their hands and knees. And then there were no more shuffles, no more sharp intakes of breath or stifled moans. In their place was something infinitely worse, a heavy, pervasive silence that filled his stomach with dread.

*“Legilimens!”*

The invasion took him by surprise, brutal jolts of magic searing through his brain as he let out a muffled howl. His first instinct was to push back against it, to force the Dark Lord out regardless of whatever consequences he might have to face for doing so. He wasn’t ready for this. Fuck, he wasn’t ready...

But then a sense of calm settled over him, as comforting as it was familiar. The pain began to recede, replaced by a sharp sense of focus. Yes, he could do this. All those memories that could easily spell his doom had been left at Hogwarts, safe in the Pensieve. He still carried their imprint, but only in faint glimpses, virtually undetectable to any intruder, even the Dark Lord himself.

Feeling more confident, he shoved a few stray recollections behind his shields before offering up the rest. Nothing to fear now... these memories had been carefully edited, prolonged scenes of harsh punishment, even torture, coupled with incessant demands regarding Potter’s whereabouts. He presented a vision of himself stalking the corridors, his quiet attempts to shield the children from harm transferred into something far more sinister.

But just as he began to relax, sensing the Dark Lord’s grudging approval, a vivid image thrust itself to the forefront. He recognized his own bedroom shrouded in darkness, heard a familiar whimper...

And there they were — two bodies moving in an unmistakable rhythm, their naked skin faintly illuminated by the light of a single candle.

Horried, he saw himself kneeling behind her, gripping her by the hips as he took her fast and hard, the sound of his harsh pants echoed by her soft moans. No... oh fuck, how could he have forgotten? A memorable night, to say the least, and it had only happened a week ago. How could he have been careless enough to...

Abruptly, he shut that line of questioning down, refusing to dwell on the circumstances that had led up to such a passionate encounter. He wouldn't even allow her name to cross his mind, struggling to conceal a torrent of emotion as he watched her push her hips back to meet his frantic thrusts. Her face was pressed into the pillow, her identity safely concealed by a wild cascade of hair, its color indistinguishable in the darkness. Had she lifted her head to glance back at him? He couldn't remember... fuck, he had no idea. His own head had been tossed back, eyes tightly shut as he let out a shuddering groan.

Almost there... would he call out her name when it happened? No, no, please...

She was the one who cried out first, letting out an unintelligible whimper as she shuddered from head to toe. And then she was sated, her soft murmur of contentment telling him she wasn't likely to lift her head anytime soon. It all depended on him now, their very existence hinging on the moment when he'd finally lose control. Close now, so close... body rigid with tension, visibly shaking as he'd moved with increasing desperation. And then...

"Li..."

The rest of the word was swallowed by a howl of pleasure as his hips jerked forward, his body bent low over hers. Somehow, she ended up flat on her stomach with him lying on top of her, shielding her even further from the Dark Lord's view. After a moment, she murmured something indistinguishable, answered by his own drowsy grunt as the memory began to fade.

But he wasn't safe yet. Oh no. If the Dark Lord believed he was romantically involved with someone... well, there'd be problems. He'd demand to meet her, first and foremost, would want to make sure she was loyal to his cause. And if Severus failed to produce her...

Swallowing hard, he jerked another memory to the forefront, showing himself fumbling for his robes in the darkness. That was followed by an image of him withdrawing something from his pocket, a handful of coins he deposited on the bedside table. An innocent gesture, just a bit of pocket change he hadn't wanted to carry around all day. But in this context, it gave the appearance that he'd been paying for services rendered, further reinforced by a flash of himself walking out the door without a backward glance.

"A prostitute, Severus?" Voldemort said, his expression inscrutable as he finally withdrew. "When have you been finding the time to visit prostitutes?"

"It isn't a frequent occurrence, my lord. Just the once, I assure you."

"This whore of yours... where did you find her?"

"Hogsmeade," Severus said, keeping his expression stoic.

"And you spent the night with her?"

"No more than a few hours."

"I see." Voldemort gazed down at his wand, caressing it with the tips of his fingers. "A few hours during which you chose to absent yourself from your duties..."

"It was the middle of the night, my lord. The castle was well secured."

"A few hours which were not cleared with me."



“No,” Severus said quietly.

Of course, he’d done nothing wrong. He knew that, just as he understood that it didn’t matter. The Dark Lord would’ve seized on any excuse to punish him, had chosen him as a scapegoat long before he’d plundered through his memories. Someone to punish for his most recent failures... who better than his most trusted servant? That would send a clear message to the rest of his followers, reminding them that *no one* was above reproach.

Severus had always been skilled at interpreting these moods. Indeed, that particular talent had saved his life on more than one occasion. But in times like these, it seemed more like a curse, this terrible ability to spot the shadow before the ax descended. It left him with nothing to do but anticipate the worst possible outcome, to dwell on...

“*Crucio.*”

What if he died tonight? That thought haunted him as he gritted his teeth against the pain. Not that he believed the Dark Lord had any intention of killing him. No, he was still far too valuable at this stage of the game. But the barely contained rage, that ever present streak of insanity, combined with an obscene amount of magical power? All it would take was...

The next curse hit him even harder, marked by a muffled grunt as he dropped to the floor. Sucking in a deep breath, he fought to control the pain, gripping fistfuls of his cloak as he braced himself for the next onslaught.

Yes, it was indeed possible that he wouldn’t survive this punishment. And if he didn’t? Well, the war would be lost. That was a given. All his efforts would be in vain, and Lily... dear god, Lily...

“*Crucio.*”

He groaned, curling in on himself as his arms and legs began to spasm.

What would happen to her? She’d be alone, unprotected... why the bloody hell hadn’t he...

“*Sectumsemptra!*”

Using his own curse on him? Sick bastard... though at least he was still showing some measure of restraint. The slash across Severus’s chest was painful, but he could tell that it wasn’t deep. Would his luck hold out? Or would the Dark Lord lose control like he had over the summer, an uncontrollable rage that would’ve ended in death if Charity hadn’t come along?

Charity... would *she* be able to help Lily? Perhaps, and there were the passages, too. Those damn passages that had caused him so much anxiety... strange to realize they could also be a comfort. Lily had said they were safe, inaccessible to anyone who lacked permission to enter the Headmaster’s quarters. She wouldn’t have said that if it wasn’t true, would she? No, of course not. Which meant...

His thoughts were interrupted by another curse, one he didn’t even recognize. He only felt the pain, as if invisible flames were licking at his skin from the inside. Moaning softly, he bore it as well as he could manage, biting his lip until he tasted blood.

The passages... at least she'd have access to food. Potions? Maybe. Maybe not. Bloody hell... why hadn't he made sure she had plenty of Polyjuice on hand? She could've disguised herself and snuck out of the castle, found a way to contact the Order. They would've smuggled her into hiding, could've...

"Severus," Voldemort said, pacing back and forth in front of him. "Do you know why I'm so displeased?"

"Because," he responded, his voice thick with pain. "Because Potter continues to elude you."

"Indeed. Of course, I can't hold you responsible for that. Not completely. It's the others with their excuses, all their false leads... I'm sure you can imagine my frustration when I'm summoned again and again, only to discover that the boy is nowhere to be found."

"Yes, my lord."

"Dimwitted fools. I'm beginning to doubt they'll ever find him on their own... which makes your involvement that much more crucial. A hint, Severus. That's all I'm asking. One small clue that isn't based on rumors or outright lies. You're in an ideal position to provide this. Why have you not done so?"

"My lord, I've tried. You've seen how I interrogate the students, how I..."

"*Crucio!*"

Unable to help himself, Severus swore aloud, his voice emerging as a pitiful whimper as the curse ripped through his body. For a wild moment, he almost hoped that the Dark Lord *would* finish him off, wishing for nothing more than the agony to stop. But then he came back to his senses, riding out the torturous waves as they gradually receded.

Polyjuice. No, Lily didn't have any Polyjuice. Foolish. Yes, and selfish, too. What had he been thinking, keeping her all to himself despite the precariousness of his situation? No wonder she'd defied his methods, grasping at whatever scrap of independence she could find. She'd recognized the need for it where he had not, had known a time might come when he wouldn't be there. She'd already proven that on the night she'd snuck out for the apples, choosing to take care of her own needs rather than waiting for him to return.

How had he failed to recognize such an obvious truth? Lily *would* take care of herself. Hadn't she always done so? Yes, she'd always known what was best for her, trusting her own instincts to guide her in the right direction. Even when she'd sacrificed herself for her son, she'd done so as a matter of choice, not from a lack of options. She might be headstrong, bordering on reckless depending on the situation, but had she ever been the type to place herself in danger without fully understanding the consequences?

No. No, of course not. So why had he treated her like some helpless child, incapable of making her own decisions? And more importantly, what could he do about it now?

He could trust her. It was as simple as that.

To imagine leaving her alone in the middle of a war? Terrifying. And yet... well, maybe it was time to accept that he couldn't control everything. It had been nice to pretend otherwise, to imagine that his efforts to protect her couldn't possibly fail. But that wasn't reality, was it?

No. Now more than ever, he needed to trust her to make a few choices of her own. If the Dark Lord killed him tonight, he had to believe she'd figure out what to do, even if he wouldn't be there to provide a solution. He needed to believe it to preserve his own sanity, but more than that...

*"It's hard to trust someone who doesn't trust me in return."*

Yes, he understood now. Too little, too late, perhaps, but he finally understood.

He barely felt the next curse, distantly realizing that his robes were in tatters. Cold... so cold... he couldn't seem to focus now, his eyes drifting closed without bothering to open again. A voice, harsh and strident, commanding him to... what? He couldn't make out the words, deciding it didn't matter as he surrendered to the darkness.

## 60. Conscious Choice

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### Chapter 60: Conscious Choice

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“Well,” Minerva said, transfiguring a handkerchief. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

That was it. No shock. No tears. No impotent fury or fierce denials. Minerva’s expression was utterly calm, her hand steady as she held out the scrap of fabric.

“Why do you say that?” Lily asked, accepting it with a nod and dabbing at her eyes.

“The way Albus always insisted on exposing him to danger, refusing to let any of us get involved. All those arguments we had...”

“Arguments?”

“Oh yes.” Minerva smiled, though there was no humor behind it. “We had some terrible rows over the years. I never understood why he wouldn’t just send Harry into hiding, or at least allow for better supervision. Why make him even more of a target than he already was?”

“I wondered the same thing,” Lily said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “Not that there was anything I could do about it.”

“There wasn’t anything any of us could do. No matter what we said, Albus just kept telling us that Harry needed to learn to defend himself. That it would be *good* for him, if you can imagine that.”

Lily snorted. “That must be why he made sure to hire such exceptional Defense professors.”

“I pointed that out myself, way back when Quirrell was given the job. And don’t even get me started on Lockhart. We had Slytherin’s heir wreaking havoc, and who was our resident expert in the Dark Arts? Some bumbling, self-satisfied fool who...”

“I don’t get it,” Lily interrupted. “Why *wouldn’t* Dumbledore have wanted Harry to have better teachers? If he was going to face You-Know-Who, shouldn’t he have had all the training he could get?”

“Maybe,” Minerva said, looking thoughtful. “Maybe not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the most powerful witches and wizards learn most of what they know on their own. It isn’t something that happens in a classroom.”

“But you’re a teacher. Surely you don’t think...”

Minerva shook her head. “When you’ve been doing this as long as I have, you learn to recognize the limitations of your profession. I might be able to give my students a strong

foundation, but what they do with that is up to them. The knowledge itself is nothing. Not without three other factors.”

“Which are?”

“Talent, instinct, and determination.”

Lily nodded, waiting for her to continue.

“The strongest magic comes to us naturally. You know that better than anyone. What you did that night in Godric’s Hollow... did anyone teach you that? Did you read about it in a book?”

“No, of course not. It just sort of... *happened*.”

“Exactly. It happened because you were in a situation that tested your limits. In the end, that’s the only way any of us can know what we’re truly capable of.”

“So what you’re saying...”

“That Albus was pushing Harry to rely on his own strength? Yes, I believe so.”

Lily frowned. “So all of those terrible teachers... he hired them on purpose?”

“Perhaps,” Minerva said. “Though to be fair, not all of them were bad. Remus certainly seemed competent, and Severus...” She trailed off, as if she’d forgotten how to pay him a compliment and wasn’t quite sure she wanted to remember. “Well, I suppose he did a decent job. He certainly had plenty of experience in the subject.”

Lily opened her mouth, tempted to point out that they were all damn lucky that Severus knew so much about the Dark Arts. But then she paused, reminding herself that up until an hour ago, Minerva had been thoroughly convinced he was a traitor and a murderer, probably a rapist, too. If the worst she was dishing out now was the occasional snide remark? Well, that was progress.

“Severus was a good teacher,” she said, her voice quiet. “It’s just a shame Harry hated him too much to learn anything from him.”

Minerva sniffed. “You can hardly blame *Harry* for...”

“I don’t,” she interrupted. “Severus went out of his way to be a bastard. I only meant...”

“And you find that so easy to forgive?”

There was no missing the sudden sharpness in Minerva’s voice. Lily had heard it countless times, usually when her old professor was defending one of her own. In this case, however, it was the worst sort of insult. *She* was Harry’s mother, wasn’t she? What right did Minerva have to question her judgment?

“Severus has taken responsibility for his actions,” she said, struggling to keep the irritation out of her voice. “He’s explained himself, has apologized...”

“Has he apologized to Harry?”

“When has he had the chance?!” she burst out. “It isn’t like he can just waltz up to Gryffindor Tower, fall on his knees and beg for forgiveness! Harry isn’t even...”

“Lily...”

“He’s been in hiding for *months!* And do you know why? Because Severus risked his *life* to make sure he wasn’t captured!”

“You misunderstand...”

“He owes Harry an apology. Yes, I’m well aware of that. But I don’t see the bloody point in bringing it up now when he can’t... might not *ever* be able to...”

Minerva cut her off with a sigh. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I only meant...”

“Oh, I know what you meant. You’re so used to thinking the worst of Severus that you don’t know how to do anything else! Well, fine. Maybe I can’t change that. But I’d think you’d be able to trust *my* judgment. Do you *really* think I’d be with him if...”

I do trust you, “Minerva said, holding up a hand to stop her.” I do. But I also know you’ve been cut off from the world for most of your adult life. Having had only one person to rely on for so long? I’m sure that has led to any number of feelings. Gratitude, loyalty, obligation...”

“So?”

“In your position, I imagine it would be easy to overlook his shortcomings. You might even have come to assume the kindness he’s shown you is how he behaves toward the rest of the world. I hate to tell you this, my dear, but it isn’t. He might not be a traitor, but he...”

“He can be cold,” Lily interrupted. “Yes. Stubborn and harsh, and I’ve never met *anyone* who can hold a grudge like he can. Oh, and did I mention how critical he can be? Rather ironic, since he can’t stand being criticized himself. And don’t even get me started on...”

“Well, yes,” Minerva said, looking flustered. “Severus can certainly be difficult...”

Lily snorted. “He’s a bloody pain in the ass sometimes. So? He’s not perfect. Neither am I.”

“*You?* I hardly think that’s a fair comparison.”

“I’m just as stubborn as he is. Headstrong, too. I can be selfish sometimes, far more nosy than I’d like to admit. I hold my own grudges, just like he does, and I say terrible things when I’m angry. But I have good qualities, too... I’d like to think those balance out my flaws.”

“Of course they do,” Minerva hastened to reassure her. “But Severus isn’t like you. You’ve always been kind and generous, never turned your back on anyone who needed help. You’ve never gone out of your way to hurt the people around you, you...”

Lily chuckled, low and slightly bitter. “Yes, I have.”

“Oh, I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, it’s true. I’ve hurt someone. Not just anyone either, but a person who was supposed to be my best friend. I was the only real friend he had, and what did I do?”

“Severus?” Minerva frowned. “If you’re talking about what happened when you were at school, you had *every reason...*”

“Maybe. But I didn’t have to be so brutal about it, did I?”

“Surely you can’t blame yourself for that,” Minerva looked appalled. “You were 15!”

“I don’t blame myself,” Lily said quietly. “Not anymore. But...”

“He was up to his eyeballs in the Dark Arts! Hanging around with Death Eaters!”

“I’m not saying I was wrong to distance myself. Just that I didn’t have to go out of my way to hurt him in the process. I could’ve given him another chance, I...”

Minerva shook her head. “What he said to you...”

“What he said was awful. Yes. But what I said to him was pretty awful, too. We’re not so different, Severus and me — embarrass us, hurt our pride, and we both lash out. He’s not a bad person, any more than I am. He’s...”

“You want to see the best in him,” Minerva interrupted. “You always have, which I must say is admirable. But you shouldn’t let it blind you either. Not all of his actions can be chalked up to teenage mistakes.”

“*Blind* me?” Lily laughed. “Yes, I do see the best in him. I’ve also seen the worst. That’s why I love him — because I see him for who he truly is.”

“You love...”

“Yes,” she said, her voice firm. “I *love* him. Deep down, I suppose I always have. So if you think this is out of gratitude or guilt or obligation, I’m sorry, but you’re wrong. As for Harry...”

“James has been gone for nearly 20 years. We all know that, and of course, you can’t be expected to be alone for the rest of your life. But *Severus*? It just doesn’t make sense, Lily. I don’t know... maybe it’s because he’s been your only option, but *really*...”

“It *does* make sense. You just don’t want to see it.”

“I thought James was the love of your life. You *married* him, you... and little Harry...”

“Yes, James gave me Harry,” Lily said with a smile. “I’ll always be grateful to him for that. He was... well, he was what I needed at the time. But it couldn’t have lasted. I know that now.”

Minerva laid a hand on her arm, her voice gentle as she spoke. “Are you sure you haven’t just been telling yourself this to make it easier to cope with the grief? It would certainly be understandable.”

Lily shook her head. “Can I tell you a story?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Okay,” she paused, taking a deep breath. “When I was a little girl, maybe six or seven, I saw a pair of shoes in a shop window. They were bright red with shiny buckles, the prettiest shoes I’d ever seen. I begged and pleaded until my dad agreed to let me try them on.”

Minerva’s expression softened, a slight smile touching her lips as she motioned for her to continue.

“Well, those shoes pinched my feet, but I never said a thing. I let Dad buy them for me and wore them to school the next day. I didn’t even care how they fit — they looked so pretty and all the girls were jealous. But by the end of the day, I was in the nurse’s office with my feet covered in blisters, crying my eyes out.”

“That’s a shame,” Minerva said. “And the shoes?”

Lily shook her head. “I never wore them again. I went back to my old pair of Mary Janes. Standard black, a bit worn and scuffed. But you know, they fit me perfectly.”

“So you’re trying to tell me…”

“I’m saying that James and I might’ve looked pretty on the outside, but it was never the right fit.”

“But you were so happy…”

“No,” Lily said quietly. “I wasn’t. I needed an escape, that’s all. I could explain, but… well, it doesn’t matter. All I can say is that I love Severus, that he’s right for me in ways that James never was.”

“All right, dear,” Minerva said, though Lily could tell by her expression that she didn’t quite believe her. “I wasn’t trying to pry, I just…”

“You don’t understand it. I know. I’m not expecting that, I’m just hoping that you’ll respect my feelings.”

“Of course.”

Lily sighed, leaning back in her chair. It didn’t matter what she said — she knew this wasn’t a battle she could win tonight. She was fighting against a lifetime of assumptions, prejudices she’d had to endure since the day she’d come to Hogwarts. Gryffindors and Slytherins? They simply didn’t mix.

Stupid, really. People were far too complex to be split up into four neat categories, deemed as good or bad or simply incompatible based on which House they’d been sorted into as children. Teenage rivalries were one thing, but the adults should’ve known better. And yet there was Minerva… staring off into space with a bewildered expression, probably wondering how Severus Snape could possibly compare with James Potter, Quidditch star and Gryffindor golden boy.

That favoritism seemed tragic somehow, even though Lily realized she was benefiting from it herself. Minerva had always had a soft spot for her, which must’ve been why she was holding back on further questioning. Deep down, it was also why Lily knew she could trust her. Flaws and blind spots aside, Minerva was one of the most fiercely loyal people she’d ever known.

“Minerva?” she said quietly. “Can you find out if he’s gotten back yet?”

“I suppose so.” Frowning, Minerva turned to face the portrait behind her. “Forthwind,” she said, answered by a soft grunt as a figure emerged from a pile of hay. He was a gaunt man who appeared to be in his 60s, dressed in the garb of a medieval peasant.



“Lily, meet Forthwind. He was gamekeeper here at Hogwarts during the 12th century. Forthwind, meet Lily Potter.”

“Evans.”

The painted man didn’t speak, merely dipped his head in a respectful nod.

“Forthwind is unable to speak,” Minerva explained. ‘Hit by a nasty hex when he was just a boy, and I’m afraid he never quite recovered.’ To the portrait, she said, “Will you please go see if Headmaster Snape has returned?”

With a brief nod, he turned and exited the portrait.

“If he can’t speak,” Lily said, faintly amused. “Then how is he supposed to find out? I mean, if he has to ask the other portraits...”

“Oh, he does. That one has never been given access to the Headmaster’s office. I wouldn’t fret about it though — he’s developed his own ways of communicating over the centuries.”

As they lapsed into silence, Lily wondered why they were both dancing around the subject of Harry’s impending death. How could she sit here joking about *portraits*, of all things, knowing she was on the verge of losing her child?

But she already knew the answer to that. It was too terrible to even think about, let alone discuss. When she’d blurted out the truth, she’d immediately wanted to deny it, to push it away like some terrible dream. But didn’t she *need* to talk about it? That was the reason she’d stayed, after all, rather than going back to the Headmaster’s quarters to wait. She couldn’t stand the thought of being alone, left with nothing to do but dwell on her deepest fears. And Severus... well, she had no idea how to talk to *him* about what she was feeling. He’d lied to her, after all, had withheld information that might still have devastating consequences.

But on the other hand... could she honestly say she didn’t understand why he’d done it?

No, not after reliving those memories she’d shown to Minerva, the history of a man who’d spent the last two decades struggling on her behalf. The way he’d switched sides in his efforts to save her life, swearing to protect her son when he’d thought there was nothing else he could do? Yes, the idea of Harry dying was devastating for her. There was no denying that. But what must it be like for *him*? Fighting all those years to keep her son alive, only to learn that Dumbledore had been deceiving him all along?

He hadn’t wanted to hurt her, of course, hadn’t wanted her to do anything reckless or sacrifice herself. But there was something more than that, too. Telling her the truth would’ve also meant admitting that he’d failed her, that everything he’d tried to do had been in vain.

It didn’t matter that it wasn’t his fault. He would’ve still blamed himself, assuming that she’d despise him for letting her down.

Was that it? Yes, it had to be. He’d been afraid that the truth would destroy them *both*. Better to bury it somewhere deep inside, to push it away and pretend that everything was fine. Assuming that tragedy was inevitable either way, why would he have wanted to invite it into their lives any sooner than he *had* to?

And with that, she knew she had the answer. Knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt, which brought her to a single conclusion.

Harry had to live. It was as simple as that.

She couldn't lose her son, would rather die than let that happen. But it wasn't just about her, was it? No, Severus couldn't lose him either. She couldn't let all his efforts be in vain, couldn't condemn him to a life filled with remorse and the awful feeling of failure. If Harry died, they'd *both* be broken, having sacrificed so much for nothing. No, she refused to accept that, refused to believe...

"Ah," Minerva said, jarring her from her musings. "There he is."

Lily lifted her eyes to the portrait, watching eagerly as the ancient gamekeeper shuffled into view.

"Well?"

Forthwind held out his hands in a helpless gesture, shaking his head.

"So he's not back yet," Minerva said. "Has there been any word?"

Another shake.

"Very well. Feel free to carry on with your nap."

"It's been hours," Lily said quietly. "Something's wrong."

"I'm sure he's fine. It is getting a bit late though. Would you like some tea?"

"Tea?"

"Yes," Minerva said, flashing her a smile. "I must admit I'm rather tired, and we still have so much to talk about."

Of course, she was right, though Lily knew the topic of Harry's sacrifice wasn't going to come up again that night. Why? She couldn't say. Maybe Minerva was hiding her reaction because she didn't want to upset her. Or maybe after enduring one bombshell after another, she just needed time to process it all.

Whatever the reason, Lily could no longer sit there and pretend. Just the thought of making polite conversation as her silent fears ran rampant...

And it wasn't just about Harry now either. The fact that Severus still hadn't returned... she *knew* something was wrong, felt it deep in her heart, despite Minerva's insistence that he was fine. Why stay here with someone who couldn't possibly understand what she was feeling, someone whose first instinct had been to dismiss any anxieties she might have?

"Thank you, but no," she said, rising to her feet. "I really should be getting back."

"Are you sure?" Minerva frowned. "The idea of you sitting up there alone..."

"I'll be fine. Might need your help though."

"Of course. What can I do?"

"Well, remember how you brought me here?"

"I do apologize for that," Minerva said, looking slightly ashamed.

“Don’t. Believe me, I’d much rather be turned into a mouse than be discovered by one of those bloody Carrows. Besides, it isn’t like that was the first time.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

“Can you do it again?” Lily asked. “Put me in your pocket and take me back to the alcove? I can make it back to the Headmaster’s quarters from there.”

“How?”

“There are... well, it won’t be a problem. Let’s just leave it at that.”

Minerva hesitated, her eyes bright with curiosity. But then she shrugged, withdrawing her wand from her sleeve. “Ready?”

“Yes. No, wait!”

“What is it?”

“I need you to promise me,” Lily said, reaching out to clutch her hand. “Promise you won’t tell. You see how important it is to keep all of this a secret, don’t you? If the wrong people found out...”

“I know,” Minerva interrupted. “Despite my... personal concerns, I do understand what you showed me. Albus laid out a plan that was quite specific, and... well, he must’ve had his reasons for concealing all of this from the rest of us. I have no choice but to respect that, even if I may not like it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. As I told you earlier, I’d rather know the truth.”

“So you won’t tell anyone?”

“Not a soul.”

“Well, what if you’re captured?” Lily stared back at her, overwhelmed by the sensation of growing unease. “What if someone tortures you and forces you to confess? Or they could use Legilimens or Veritaserum, or... god, I shouldn’t have done this. I should’ve Obliviated you when I had the chance!”

“So why didn’t you?” Minerva interrupted. “I know you were thinking about it — I saw your fingers tightening around your wand. What stopped you?”

“I don’t know. I was... I wasn’t thinking clearly. I...”

“You needed someone you could trust.”

Lily stared at her in silence, surprised. How could she have known that? It wasn’t as if she’d told her about her fight with Severus — she hadn’t even implied that he’d been keeping the truth from her. And yet somehow, Minerva had managed to read between the lines, had been able to interpret her distress for what it was. A deep feeling of betrayal, the sense that she’d had no one else in the world to turn to.

That was the danger in having only one person to rely on — a desperate need to find some other source of solace when they inevitably let you down. It defied all logic, defied anything

approaching common sense. It was a matter of instinct, grappling for anything to keep yourself afloat when the tide of your own emotions threatened to pull you under.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I needed someone I could trust. Otherwise, I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

And that was true, too. As reckless as her decision to reveal herself to Minerva might seem, it might very well have prevented her from doing something far worse. Like leaving the castle, for example, exposing herself to the Wizarding world at large. She could’ve gotten herself killed, not to mention Severus and possibly Harry, too. In a situation where she’d had to do *something*, she really had chosen the best possible option.

“Someone to trust,” Minerva repeated, interrupting her thoughts. “You still do, I’d imagine.”

“Yes,” Lily whispered.

“Well, the hardest thing about trust is that it doesn’t come with any guarantees. It’s a choice you have to make, sometimes against all odds. It’s...”

“An act of faith.”

“Yes,” Minerva agreed. “I could tell you that I have no intention of telling anyone, that I don’t even intend on storing these memories in my head. I could point out that I’m quite capable of hiding the imprints should the need arise — I *have* learned a thing or two about Occlumency over the years...”

“From Dumbledore?”

“Yes. And I could also tell you — from experience — that I’m not particularly susceptible to torture. All of these things help, I hope, but they’re not guarantees. That’s what it means to be at war — no matter what actions you take, there’s always a certain amount of risk.”

“I know.”

Minerva nodded. “Which makes all of this simple, really. Is this a risk you want to take? You still have a choice. Go ahead and take out your wand if you wish. Oblivate me.”

“You’d really let me do that?” Lily raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“I won’t stop you.”

Was it a bluff? She couldn’t tell, though she supposed it didn’t matter. There was no way she was going to Oblivate Minerva now, not after everything they’d shared. But she appreciated the offer nonetheless, recognizing it for what it was. Minerva was giving her one more chance to make her choice, now that she’d calmed down and could approach the situation more rationally. Whatever she did from here, she’d be making that decision with a clear head, not out of desperation or shock.

“Well,” she said after a moment, her lips twitching. “I can’t Oblivate you. How would I get back?”

Minerva relaxed, flashing her a tired smile. “I suppose that settles it then. Shall we?”

The next thing she knew, she was nestled in Minerva's pocket, swaying back and forth as they headed up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. She couldn't see a thing, of course, but judging by the deep silence that surrounded them, there wasn't much to look at anyway. What time was it? 2 AM? Three? It was comforting to know that the entire castle had long since gone to bed, that the risk of discovery was virtually nonexistent. On the other hand, she couldn't help worrying about Severus, the fact that it was just a few hours before dawn and he still hadn't returned.

But she didn't have much time to dwell on that before she was pulled out into the open again, cringing through another transformation behind the familiar tapestry. She forced herself to smile, to return Minerva's embrace, waiting for her to cast a quick Muffliato before she dared to speak.

"Charity," she said, keeping her voice low even though there was no longer any reason to do so. "I'll send her to you."

Minerva nodded.

"And Severus... don't say anything to him, please. Not yet. I want to tell him the truth, but I need to figure out the right way to do it. He's... well, he's not going to be pleased. And there are other things to sort out... I can't explain, it's just all a bit of a mess right now."

"As far as Severus is concerned," Minerva said. "I know nothing."

"Thank you. Not just for this, but for everything."

"Of course."

"Well, I guess I'll say good night then."

"Good night, Lily. It's wonderful to have you back."

Soon enough, she was in her own quarters again — familiar, safe, yet alien somehow. It felt like ten years since she'd last seen the bedroom they shared, blurred by her tears as she'd made her frantic escape. Everything was in sharp focus now, every piece of furniture, every object seeming to have a special significance she hadn't noticed before. The bed where he held her in his arms at night, where they'd made love just that morning... the wardrobe filled with a neat row of black robes, right next to a haphazard pile of her more colorful attire. She could feel him here... not just him, but the two of them entwined, the life they'd managed to make for themselves despite a world that seemed to have been designed to keep them apart.

But she couldn't blame it on the world this time. The choice was hers now, bringing her to a crossroads she hadn't recognized until that very moment. It wasn't just about forgiving him — she already knew she was capable of that. No, it was something more.

If she stayed here, that meant sticking by him no matter what. It meant trusting him without question, even in the face of disappointment. That was the only thing that would hold their relationship together in the midst of so much turmoil, the only way they could hope to make it through this bloody war.

Leaving the bedroom, she wandered into the study, glancing down as she heard the crunch of broken glass. And then she remembered... a shattering sound in the distance, followed by a howl of frustration. That must've been when Severus had been summoned, the worst timing

she could possibly imagine. Where was he now? Was he okay? Had he managed to keep his cover intact, or had it finally proven to be too much for him, his secrets spilling out like the firewhiskey that had soaked into the carpet?

Sighing to herself, she removed the stain, vanishing the broken glass before settling herself on the couch.

She'd had every right to be upset. She knew that. Yes, and she'd certainly had the right to let him know how much he'd hurt her. But that didn't mean she could just ignore the grim reality of their situation.

Under different circumstances, it wouldn't have mattered. She could've taken time to brood, given him the silent treatment, or even disappeared for a while when she'd needed some space. Under *these* circumstances, however, she didn't have that luxury. Whatever happened between them, whatever disagreements they might have, she couldn't leave him vulnerable. No, not when there was no telling when he might be summoned, when his very survival might hinge on his ability to keep a cool head.

Of course, she had to be realistic. She couldn't pretend she'd ever be able to control her emotions as well as he did. But couldn't she find ways of letting him know she was upset without tapping into his worst fears? She'd seen it in his eyes earlier, the unspoken question of whether she was going to leave him, the underlying terror that she'd go off and do something reckless. But if she could take those things out of the equation...

Yes, that would definitely help. Would she ever get that chance though? Or was it already too late?

Glancing up at the clock, she sucked in a sharp breath, realizing it was well past 4 AM. From there, her eyes traveled to the window, staring up at the ink black sky that was nearly obliterated by heavy snowfall. It had to be freezing out there... was he still at Malfoy Manor, sitting through some long, tedious meeting? Or was he out in the cold somewhere, injured and broken, with no one there to help him?

"Please," she whispered as she laid her head down on the couch. "Just bring him home."

She wouldn't remember falling asleep, a combination of exhaustion and a little too much firewhiskey dragging her off into a world of none too pleasant dreams. Awareness only struck her as she came back to consciousness, surprised to find the study bathed in gentle morning sunlight.

Severus was nowhere to be seen.

## 61. What the Portrait Saw

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### Chapter 61: What the Portrait Saw

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“Take him back to Hogwarts. Make sure he isn’t seen.”

The voice was barely distinguishable, the words muffled as if spoken from behind a heavy door. But how could that be? The Dark Lord was standing right above him, an ominous shadow silhouetted against his tightly closed lids.

“He dead?”

Who was that? Amycus? Severus struggled to focus, curious as to what the answer would be. Of course, any level of awareness would suggest that he was indeed still alive, but he couldn’t feel his body, could no longer taste fear in his mouth or detect the odor of blood. He felt separated from himself somehow, reduced to some insubstantial wisp in an endless black void.

“Are you blind?” Voldemort snapped. “No, he’s not dead!”

“Looks dead.”

“Well, he isn’t. He’s merely... incapacitated.”

“My lord?” This was a different voice, every bit as harsh, though distinctly feminine.

“Yes, Alecto?”

“How are we supposed to get him into the castle without being seen? We can’t Apparate on the grounds.”

“Yes, I’m well aware,” Voldemort said, his words dripping with impatience. “It is *my* school, after all, or have you forgotten?”

“No, my lord.”

“Good. Now I repeat: *he must not be seen*. Our enemies *cannot* be made aware of his current condition. Any show of weakness...”

Severus never heard the rest. He came back to consciousness to discover that the scene had shifted, a wild array of colors flashing behind his eyes as icy wind whipped through his hair. Sensation was returning by slow degrees, but not the white-hot agony he would’ve expected. The only thing he felt now was the cold, harsh and biting, followed by a sudden sickness in the pit of his stomach. Moving, twisting, swirling as if he would never stop, until finally, his body slammed into a hard surface, knocking the breath from his lungs.

He cracked an eye open, staring in confusion at a wide expanse of blinding whiteness.

“He awake?” Alecto questioned from somewhere above. “*Snape!* Erm, Headmaster Snape. Can you hear me?”

“Where...” he croaked, then let out a miserable groan, managing to shift onto his side. For several minutes, he retched painfully, panting hard as he laid his head back down against the hardpacked snow.

“Guess so,” Alecto said. “Not that that helps much. What the hell are we supposed to do now?”

“Well, we might want to cover him up. He’ll freeze his bollocks off out here.”

Alecto snorted. “Like I care.”

Only then did Severus realize he was naked, bare skin numbed by the cold. He slid a hand down in a feeble attempt to cover himself, hating the rush of gratitude he felt as Amycus whipped off his own cloak and draped it over him.

“If the Dark Lord had wanted to kill him,” Amycus said, “he’d be dead already. Better do our best to keep him alive.”

“Suppose you’re right. So what do we do with him?”

“Hospital Wing?”

Alecto grunted. “Can’t do that,” she said. “No one’s supposed to see him.”

“Well, he needs *some* kind of healing. Don’t think he’s gonna make it on his own.”

“Just...” Severus rasped out, frustrated at his inability to sound the least bit forceful. “Just get me to my bloody office.”

“How?”

Idiots. He was the one who was incapacitated, barely able to speak, and they wanted *him* to offer a solution? Well, he supposed there were no easy answers — making it from the Apparition point all the way across the grounds, let alone through several floors of the castle? He couldn’t imagine a way to accomplish that without being seen. If it was the middle of the night, perhaps they’d have a chance, but the brilliant rays of sunlight piercing his eyelids told him it was far too late for that.

“Headmaster?” Alecto said.

“Thinking,” he muttered.

“Whatever we do, we better do it soon. The Dark Lord said the spells wouldn’t last much longer than...”

“An hour,” Amycus finished for her.

Severus frowned. “Spells?”

“Couple of them. He said one was to give you a little extra strength. The other is supposed to block the pain. So you wouldn’t...”



“So you wouldn’t start screaming when you woke up,” Alecto cut in. “You’re messed up pretty bad, you know.”

“Obviously,” Severus said dryly. Pain might’ve been absent for the moment, but he’d caught a glimpse of his damaged body before he’d been covered, could see the splotches of red in the snow. Painless or not, he could feel his nerve endings quivering, arms and legs jerking spasmodically despite his efforts to control their movements. The Dark Lord was right — without a spell to dull the effects, he’d be in agony.

The Carrows were right, too — they needed to act quickly. He had to get upstairs before he lost what little control he had left, needed to reach his quarters, his potions... Lily.

He sucked in a sharp breath, realizing he’d nearly forgotten her until that moment. He’d been too busy trying to remain conscious, attempting to wrap his head around his current predicament. But now? A thousand questions hit him all at once, some he hadn’t even dared to ask himself the night before. What was she doing? Was she all right? Did she have any idea where he’d gone? If so, she must be worried sick. Or maybe not. Maybe she hated him now, despised him for concealing the truth for so long. For all he knew, she might already be gone, having taken advantage of his prolonged absence to make her own disappearance.

Just the thought of that was unbearable, even worse than the physical suffering he was doomed to endure. And yet he had to know. If there was even the smallest hope that she was still there, that she might be willing to...

“Help me up.”

“What?” Alecto frowned.

“You heard me,” he said, sounding more like himself than he had in hours. “Help me up.”

“Don’t think that’s a good idea,” Amycus said. “You’ve lost a hell of a lot of blood, and...”

“Now.”

It was the voice he used with his students, the one that had never failed to get results. This time was no different — Amycus hunkered down beside him, nodding at his sister to move around to the other side. Together, they heaved him to his feet, gripping him by the elbows as he struggled to get his bearings.

Opening his eyes was a mistake. The world spun dizzily, bile rising in his throat all over again before he took a deep breath to calm his churning stomach.

“All right then?”

“Do I *look* all right?” he snapped.

Neither of the Carrows answered, though he couldn’t bring himself to care. He was too busy trying to control the trembling in his legs, which felt about as solid as a vat of pudding. No matter — he wouldn’t need them for long, nor did he require his eyes to do what he needed to do. Keeping them firmly shut, he conjured up a vision of the Headmaster’s office, hoping like hell he wouldn’t splinch himself as he began to turn in a slow circle.

Amycus gasped. “You can’t...”

“He’s going to tear himself in half!” Alecto said, though she didn’t sound too distressed by the idea.

That was the last thing he heard, his world dissolving into a swirl of shapes and colors for only the briefest moment before righting itself again. His body remained intact, thankfully, though the short journey lacked his usual grace. It left him sprawled on the floor in his office, swaying precariously as he attempted to push himself to his feet.

He heard a series of gasps from the portraits, though he couldn’t bring himself to respond. No, not when Voldemort’s spells chose that very moment to wear off.

To Severus’s credit, he didn’t scream. That was hardly a testament to his self-control though, as the ferocity of the pain snatched all the air from his lungs. His legs gave out beneath him, jerking once, twice, and then again before he managed to bring them under control. And then he pushed himself up on his hands and knees, blinking the moisture from his eyes as he struggled to focus on the tapestry on the opposite wall.

He crawled toward it, inch by agonizing inch, feeling the last of his strength ebbing away as the other spell faded. His eyelids were heavy, so heavy... he let them drift closed, not wanting to waste the precious energy it would take to keep them open. No need to see, he just had to keep moving...

And then he felt it, his fingers brushing against thick brocade as he let out an involuntary sob. He scrabbled at the tapestry, pushing it aside, bracing his shoulder against the door and shoving as hard as he could manage. The effort cost him dearly, darkness descending by slow degrees as the coppery scent of blood reached his nostrils. Holding his breath, he gave it one last, desperate attempt, a resounding thud echoing in his ears as his world went black.

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Lily sat up, rubbing her eyes as she struggled to orient herself with her surroundings. Why was she in the study? Where was Severus? It was Sunday, wasn’t it? He might’ve had to leave early, but wouldn’t he have left her a note?

Setting her feet on the carpet, she gasped as a shard of glass embedded itself in her toe. It all came back to her then... the awful truth about Harry, that terrible fight, followed by the sound of glass shattering in the distance. Revealing herself to Minerva, showing her all those memories in the Pensieve... learning that Severus had been summoned, anxiety giving way to gutwrenching fear as the hours had passed.

He’d never come back. She knew that in her heart, even before she rose and went to the bedroom, staring in dismay at the perfectly made bed. No, he hadn’t been there at all... he wouldn’t have left the wardrobe hanging open, for one thing, could’ve never tolerated the half eaten sandwich that still sat on a plate on the bedside table.

She paused, frowning as something else tugged at the edge of her consciousness. There’d been a noise, some sort of thudding sound. Part of the dream she’d been having? Or...

Turning on her heel, she exited the bedroom, lifting her eyes to glance at the front door.

“Severus...”

He was sprawled out across the threshold, completely naked with a filthy cloak lying beside him. His skin was splotted with blood, smears of crimson standing out in sharp relief against his deathly pale skin.

“Severus! Oh god...”

She raced down the hall, flinging herself onto the floor beside him, one hand resting on his chest as the other fumbled at the side of his throat, trying to detect a pulse. So cold... *too* cold...

But then she felt it, a faint, rhythmic thrum beneath the pads of her fingers. She exhaled loudly, her breath catching on a sob, reaching up to scrub the tears from her eyes as she dragged the cloak over his prone body. Warm... she had to keep him warm... where the bloody hell was her wand?

“*Accio* wand,” she called in a tremulous voice, turning around to catch it as it flew toward her. Whispering a warming charm, she lifted the edge of the cloak, probing for the wound in his thigh. That seemed to be the deepest one, still bleeding profusely even though the others had long since closed up. She did her best to staunch the flow, muttering a spell before tearing off a strip of her robe and binding it around the injury.

It wasn’t enough. He needed Blood Replenishers, pain potions, something for his damaged nerves, no doubt. Judging by the way his body was twitching, he’d been hit by the *Cruciatus* multiple times. He needed somewhere comfortable to rest, and...

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft shuffle. Surprised, she lifted her eyes to Severus’s face before realizing that the sound had come from somewhere beyond him. Only then did she notice that the door was hanging wide open, leaving them both in full view of the Headmaster’s office.

And there was the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, staring back at her through a pair of piercing blue eyes.

Under normal circumstances, she would’ve panicked. She would’ve said... *something*, whether that was venting her anger or attempting to convince him she wasn’t who she appeared to be. At the moment, however, she didn’t give a damn *who* saw her. All that mattered was Severus.

But when she lowered her eyes, she could still feel that quiet scrutiny. Cursing under her breath, she got to her feet, trying to be as gentle as possible as she took Severus by the arms and pulled him the rest of the way into their quarters. Panting from the exertion, she reached for the door, slamming it behind them with all the force she could muster.

“What am I supposed to do now?” she whispered.

She wasn’t a healer. Granted, she might’ve known the basics, but she didn’t have the experience to treat anything like *this*. She didn’t even know which spells had caused most of his injuries — cuts and scorch marks, ugly purple bruises, and...

Severus shifted, letting out a low moan.

“Severus? Can you hear me?”

Other than a brief fluttering of his eyelids, there was no response. He was still moving though, ever so slightly, his rasping breath growing louder and more urgent as he arched his back. And then she understood, helping him shift onto his side, gasping as she saw the bloody mess he'd left behind.

His back was crisscrossed with deep gashes, as if someone had flayed him with a bullwhip. Why? What could he have possibly done to deserve such a terrible punishment? It couldn't have been over Harry this time. No, Harry was still in hiding. So why...

"Oh god."

Was this because of *her*? Had he been too upset to hide his emotions, unable to stop himself from revealing the truth? Had Voldemort tortured him and left him for dead, not realizing he hadn't quite finished the job? How had he made it back to Hogwarts in this condition, and what if...

What if Voldemort was coming for them?

It was a terrifying thought, to say the least, but she had no time to dwell on it. She had to find a way to help Severus, to keep him alive, even if that only meant prolonging his existence for a matter of hours... minutes... whatever happened, she couldn't let him go without a fight. She just couldn't.

"Come on then," she said, giving her a wand a flick. His limp body rose into the air, floating along in front of her as she guided it through the hallway and into the bedroom. Carefully, she lowered him onto the bed, leaving him to rest on his left side, which was relatively unscathed. Only then did she remove the cloak she'd used to cover him, tears streaming down her cheeks as her eyes swept over his ravaged body.

She was afraid to leave him, even for a second, so she called out for the potion she needed, hearing the cabinet doors in the bathroom fly open before the tiny vials streaked into the bedroom. One by one, she caught them, unable to decide which she should give him first. Blood Replenisher? Yes, he definitely needed that one most — his skin was chalk white, as if he didn't have a drop of blood left in him.

Dipping her fingers into the potion, she slipped them between his lips, relieved when instinct took over and he began to suckle. Again and again, she repeated the process — it wasn't the quickest method, for sure, but she didn't want to take the risk of pouring it into his mouth just for him to spit it back out. No, not when there was precious little to begin with, hardly enough to make any difference.

Of course, there was an endless supply of potions in the Hospital Wing, potions that Severus had probably brewed himself. It seemed terribly wrong that he wasn't able to use them now, left to lie here and suffer without his own expertise to help him. But what was she supposed to do? Leave him here alone, sneak down to the Hospital Wing and steal them? It was the middle of the day — even if she could bring herself to leave him, there was little chance she'd be able to swipe the potions without getting caught.

Then again, did it matter? Wasn't his survival more important than anything else? Besides, even if Poppy *did* see her, that didn't necessarily mean...

Poppy. Maybe she *should* reveal herself, go down there and beg her to come up here and help. Wouldn't Severus be better off in the care of an experienced healer, rather than being forced to endure her own clumsy efforts?

"I don't know," she said aloud, setting the empty vial aside before reaching for another. "I don't know what to do."

Popping the cork off the next bottle, she coated her fingers with Strength Potion, dismayed to realize there wasn't even enough for a full dose. She could only hope it would be enough to bring him around, at least temporarily. He had a right to make these choices for himself, if at all possible, should be given the chance to decide who should be allowed to see him in such a vulnerable state. There was his dignity to consider, not to mention his precarious position, which might already be compromised. She couldn't just...

Suddenly, she realized that his suckling was growing stronger, surprised to see that the tiniest bit of color had crept back into his cheeks. Dipping her fingers into the vial, she fed him the last of the potion, taking a deep breath as she watched his expression begin to change.

His features twisted into a grimace, followed by a rustling of bedsheets. She looked down to see that he was gripping them hard, fists opening and closing erratically as his chest began to heave. His mouth fell open, teeth bared as he panted, swift and desperate, as if fighting back the urge to scream. And then just as suddenly, he found some measure of control, his trembling subsiding somewhat as he opened his eyes.

"Li..."

He couldn't finish, the word lost in a violent fit of coughing.

"Water?" she asked, holding out her wand. "Blink twice if you need water."

He blinked twice in rapid succession, holding his mouth open as she whispered, "*Aguamenti*". Grunting in approval, he drank greedily, his tongue darting out to spread the moisture over his cracked lips. And then at last, he shook his head to indicate that he was finished, gazing up at her with a world of gratitude in his eyes.

"Lily, I..."

"No," she interrupted. "Don't speak."

He shook his head again, his expression frustrated. "Last night... what I did..."

"Doesn't matter."

He raised one eyebrow, lip curling ever so slightly, his usual expression when he suspected someone was feeding him a line of bullshit. It was so comforting in its familiarity that she couldn't help but chuckle, though she immediately sobered, glancing at the vials on the bedside table.

"What matters now is making you better, but I... I'm not sure how to do that. I gave you the last of the Blood Replenisher. Some Strength Potion, too. But I didn't know if I should go get Poppy, or..."

"No!" He started to push himself up, only to hiss in pain, his face turning ashen. "You can't... fuck..."

“Lay back down, Severus. Please. I won’t do it if you don’t want me to. I promise. I just thought she’d do a better job, you know. I’m not...”

He closed his eyes, breathing hard as he laid his head against the pillow. “I want you.”

“What if I make it worse?”

“I want *you*,” he repeated. “No one else.”

“All right,” she said quietly.

“And I need... potion under the sink... dark purple, almost black...”

Lily frowned before she remembered the triangular shaped bottle, much larger than the others. “I’ll be right back,” she said, then hurried from the room, tucking the potion in the pocket of her robe before conjuring a basin, filling it with warm water. She gathered up a few towels and some soap before heading back to the bedroom, enlarging the bedside table before setting the objects down.

Severus was still conscious, watching her through hooded eyes as she withdrew the bottle from her pocket. She held it up to the light, mesmerized by the brilliant shimmer of the liquid as it swirled in lazy circles.

“I don’t recognize this one. Maybe I should, but...”

“You wouldn’t.” He paused, features twisting as an involuntary shudder passed through his body. ‘It’s... something new. Pain potion. Very powerful. Also... fuck.’ Again, he hesitated, his eyes squeezing shut. “Helps the nerves.”

“You made this for the Cruciatus?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” She twisted the cap, pulling it out to discover a dropper attached to the end. Well, that was convenient. “How much?”

“Three drops.”

“Is that all?” she said, forcing a smile as she sucked a tiny amount of liquid into the dropper. “Should be easy enough. Here.”

“Wait. Not yet.”

“But you’re in pain...”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But I’d like... I’d like to remain conscious for as long as possible.”

So the potion would knock him out. That was a good thing, she supposed, though it also meant she’d have to make the rest of the decisions on her own. Could she do that? Could she give him the care he needed without making the situation worse? She hardly knew a thing about Dark Magic, which seemed to be responsible for most of his injuries. What if she gave him something that caused an adverse reaction, or...

“Lily,” he said quietly, disrupting her train of thought. “The after effects... haven’t fully hit me yet. This... it’s going to get worse before... before it passes. I’m sorry — you shouldn’t have to...”

“Shhh,” she interrupted. “Just tell me what to do.”

“Three drops. Whenever the spasms start to get bad. Takes a few minutes to...” He groaned, biting his lip through another series of tremors. “The other injuries shouldn’t be... difficult to treat. Dittany. Cauterizing charm if I... if I rip one open again. Shouldn’t need anything else, just...”

He trailed off on a gasp, his body jerking violently. Somehow, he brought it under control, arms and legs quivering with the effort as he managed to hold them still.

“Now,” he panted. “I can’t...”

Without hesitation, she lifted the dropper to his lips, squeezing three drops onto his tongue. Swallowing hard, he nodded, his expression torn between intense pain and obvious relief.

“Don’t,” he rasped out as his body began to shudder. “Don’t be afraid. It will... pass.”

That was the last coherent thought he managed to utter. The spasms took him then, arms and legs jerking like a marionette as he thrashed around on the bed. Streaks of blood soaked the sheets, his low pitched groans giving way to howls of anguish. There was nothing she could do for him... Lily knew that, struggling not to cry as she watched him ride out his torment. But as his eyes flew open again, wild and unfocused, she realized he was oblivious to her reactions. And so she let herself cry, sobbing until she had no more tears to give, until at last, there was silence.

It was jarring the way it happened — one second Severus was writhing in agony, hoarse cries echoing off the walls. And then the next, he lay there utterly still, features relaxed, no sign that he’d been in distress at all other than the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

Well, that and the blood, of course. The sheets were soaked with it, the slash across his chest dripping onto the blanket.

“Oh, Severus,” she whispered, moving closer to the bed now that it was safe to do so.

She reached for a towel, pressing it against the gash, healing it as quickly as possible before he lost any more of his precious blood. It was a clumsy effort — he was bound to have another scar to add to his impressive collection. But it helped her feel more confident, easing her mind as she treated his other wounds. Dipping another towel into the basin, she soaped his body, washing it clean. A quick but gentle levitation as she changed the sheets and then she laid him back down on his stomach, giving the whip marks on his back a thorough washing before treating them with Dittany and sealing them off. She even washed his hair, combing out the tangles with the tips of her fingers before drying it with a simple charm.

In some ways, it was a vast improvement. But without the blood and dirt staining his skin, he was as pale as a ghost, even his lips seeming as white as the sheet beneath him. He’d lost too much blood to begin with, and after this latest episode...

*Goodness, Lily! What happened?!*

She gasped, dropping her wand as she spun around on her heel.

*I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Figured you would’ve heard me come in.*

"No, I didn't. But it's okay, really, I... oh, Charity! I'm so glad you're here! I have so much to tell you."

*Minerva?*

Lily stared down at her, dumbfounded. "How did you know?"

*She found me this morning. Told me everything.*

"But how?"

*Well, she can turn into a cat, you know.* Charity jumped up on the bedside table. *I suppose the rest was easy.*

"I guess," Lily said, covering Severus's sleeping body with a blanket.

*What I don't understand is how she found out about you. Or why, I should say. She seemed to think you let her catch you on purpose.*

"I did. I was upset, I... it's complicated."

*Well, no need to explain right now. You've obviously got other things on your mind.*

"Thank you." Lily paused, giving the cat a thoughtful look. "Do you think you can help me?"

*What do you need?*

"I need to get a potion for Severus. Blood Replenisher. But I can't leave him alone. If he starts thrashing again..." Briefly, she explained what the purple potion was for and how it needed to be administered.

*I don't see how I could get it into his mouth, especially if he's flailing around like...*

"Oh no," Lily interrupted with a laugh. "No, I didn't mean that. I just need you to keep an eye on him for me. It seems to be a gradual thing — starts off with a bit of twitching before it gets really bad. If you can just come get me if that starts to happen..."

*I can do that. Where are you going?*

Lily was about to say "the Hospital Wing" before she remembered what had made her hesitate before. Not only was it the middle of the day, but she also had Severus's reaction to consider. He'd made it abundantly clear that he didn't want Poppy involved. She couldn't run the risk of getting caught stealing potions... not when there was another option.

"I'm going down to his lab. It's in the dungeon, right next to..."

*I know where it is. Been roaming around down there quite a bit lately.*

"Why?"

*I like to know what's going on. You hear a lot more about the war down there, you know. Kids aren't as afraid to talk about it.*

"No," Lily said. "I suppose they wouldn't be."



And then a thought occurred to her, as unexpected as it was disturbing. Had Charity known the truth about Harry? Lily didn't want to believe she would've concealed something like that, but then again, Charity seemed to know just about everything that went on around Hogwarts. She was even more inquisitive than Lily had been in animal form, far less discerning about where she went and who she spied on.

But that was a question for another time. For now, Severus was the priority.

Stepping closer to the bed, she smoothed his hair away from his forehead, relieved to see that he was still deeply asleep. He looked peaceful enough for the moment, but she didn't like how clammy his skin felt, couldn't pretend that the shallowness of his breathing didn't make her stomach churn with anxiety.

"Right," she said, reaching down to pull on her shoes. "Blood Replenisher brews up pretty quickly. 20 minutes? 30? I don't remember exactly... haven't made any in years. But it shouldn't take long."

The cat bobbed her head.

"Just look after him, will you?"

*Of course I will.*

As it turned out, brewing the potion went even more smoothly than Lily had hoped for. Helped by an old textbook she found in the corner of the lab, she was able to prepare the ingredients in a matter of minutes, setting a pair of cauldrons to simmer with a sigh of satisfaction. Strange to imagine that she'd stood here just 24 hours ago, mixing up a Fertility Potion. It seemed even stranger that her biggest concern at the time was the thought that she might not be able to get pregnant. That was still upsetting, of course, but it seemed minor compared to everything that had happened since.

What would happen from here? It was hard to say when her entire life had been turned upside down in a matter of hours. All she really knew was that...

The cauldrons began to hiss, indicating that the potion was finished. She dipped it out into a neat row of vials, tucking them in her pockets before hurrying back along the passageway.

"Is he all right?" she asked as she slipped out from behind the wall.

*Still sleeping.*

"Good," she said, dropping into a chair beside the bed. "He needs all the rest he can get."

Unfortunately, she had to disturb him somewhat, opening one of the vials before withdrawing a clean dropper from her pocket. Dipping it into the newly made potion, she filled it all the way to the top before slipping a finger between his lips.

"Come on, darling. Open up for me. There, that's good."

*Anything else I can do?* Charity's voice intruded on her thoughts just as she was filling the dropper for the third time.

"Oh," she said as she squeezed it into his mouth, gently massaging his throat to make sure he swallowed. "Yes, a couple of things, actually. Do you think you could..."

Just then, Severus let out a moan, his body starting to twitch.

“No. Oh no, not yet.”

He didn’t wake up this time. Not completely. His eyes flew open several times only to close again, long fingers clawing at the sheets as he twisted from side to side. Coaxing a tiny amount of the purple potion into the other dropper, she pushed it into his mouth, managing to give it one hard squeeze before he jerked his head away. This episode was much like the one before, though it seemed a little shorter, no blood left to stain the sheets as his body went limp.

“I think it’s the Replenisher,” she said quietly. “Happened last time, too, right after I gave it to him.”

*That would make sense. All that new blood circulating through him, stimulating his nerves...*

“Should I stop?”

Charity jumped on the bed, giving Severus a measuring look. *He obviously needs it. Besides, it does seem to be helping.*

She was right. His skin wasn’t quite as pale, his breathing deeper and more even as he lapsed back into peaceful slumber. Nonetheless, Lily would have to give it to him gradually. No sense in making him suffer more than was strictly necessary.

“Do you think you could stay with him one more time?”

*Of course. Why?*

“He’s going to need food. We both will. Might as well go get it now so I don’t have to leave him again.”

Her second errand was as uneventful as the first. She made it down to the kitchens right after the house elves had cleaned up from lunch, just a little while before dinner preparations would begin. Glancing around the store room, she grabbed an empty crate from the corner, filling it to the brim with fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices, a sack of oats and a loaf of bread, along with several ropes of sausage. Staggering under the weight, she slipped back into the passageway, making it safely back to their quarters in a matter of minutes.

*Feeding an army?* Charity thought at her as she set the crate down.

Lily smirked. “Just wanted to make sure we’d have enough.”

*Mission accomplished.*

“Any problems while I was gone?”

*Nope.*

“Good. If I could just ask you to do one last thing...”

Charity looked at her expectantly.

“Could you go down to Minerva? Let her know... well, just tell her that Severus will be out of commission for the next few days. See if she can keep an eye on things.”

*Want me to come back and let you know what she says?*

“Only if she refuses,” Lily said, hoping like hell she wouldn’t. Not only did Severus need time to recuperate, but she desperately wanted to be alone with him. It seemed selfish after everything Charity had done, but she couldn’t help herself. She just wanted to sit beside him and hold his hand, cry if she needed to cry without feeling self-conscious.

In the end, she got her wish. Charity never returned, making it obvious that Minerva had agreed to take over his duties. The rest of the day passed in a blur — doses of Blood Replenisher every hour, followed by several drops of his own potion when his body started to twitch. He didn’t wake up until late that evening, opening his eyes just as she was filling the second dropper.

“No.”

She looked up at him, surprised. “But the spasms are coming back.”

“Yes,” he said, gritting his teeth as a shudder passed through him. “I’m aware of that. Let me ride it out this time.”

As much as she wanted to protest, she had to admit that he was showing a great deal of improvement. His color was almost normal now, his voice much more steady. And even when he started to jerk, his limbs didn’t thrash as violently as they had before. He groaned low in his throat, once and then again, but managed to hold her gaze until the episode passed. It left him lying limp, his features etched with deep lines of exhaustion. The only thing twitching now were the corners of his mouth, tilting upward in a ghost of a smile before his expression grew more sober.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” she said, unable to feel anything beyond an overwhelming sense of relief.

“Oh, for lots of things. At the moment, however, I’m sorry you had to see me this way. As for last night...”

“Don’t. Please. Not now.”

She expected him to protest, but he didn’t. He merely nodded, closing his eyes as he rested his head against the pillow. Maybe he’d seen something in her expression that had stopped him — her anxiety, her weariness, the fact that she was so emotionally overwrought that she couldn’t handle anything else just now. Or maybe it was his own exhaustion that kept him silent, his lips parting in a heavy sigh as she pulled the blanket up over his shoulders.

“Severus?” she whispered a few minutes later, not expecting a response. It was enough that he was sleeping soundly, without the aid of his potion. She knew then that the worst had passed, shedding tears of relief as she transfigured her chair into a tiny cot. But when she closed her eyes, she was assaulted by a thousand images all at once, unable to forget the terrible things she’d witnessed that day. Severus thrashing around, crying out in anguish, how pitiful his ravaged flesh had looked before she’d managed to heal him.

But most of all, she saw him lying across the threshold, naked and bleeding, his last, desperate attempt to reach her before it was too late. What would’ve happened if he hadn’t managed to get the door open? She would’ve never known he was out there in his office, a

host of portraits looking on as he'd lain there unconscious on the hard stone floor. No potions. No water. No voice to give him comfort or soothing hand to tend his injuries. Would they have attempted to save him? Summoned someone, perhaps? Or would they have let it happen, telling themselves there was nothing they could do as he'd bled to death right in front of them?

Perhaps it was unfair, but she couldn't help feeling resentful, wondering if she was the only person who even cared if he lived or died. To everyone else, he was a traitor, a murderer, a weapon to be wielded against the other side. But was he ever just a man? Did any of them ever stop to consider that he had feelings, too, that he was capable of feeling pain as deeply as anyone else did?

Probably not. Even Minerva, who'd seen undeniable proof of his innocence, had struggled to give him the benefit of the doubt. And whose fault was that?

Dumbledore.

Once the name flashed across her mind, she couldn't let it go. She'd hardly even thought about the portrait when she'd been taking care of Severus, unable to give a damn whether she'd been spotted or not. But suddenly, all she could see were those piercing blue eyes, that speculative expression she'd seen just before she'd dragged Severus into their quarters. Maybe it wouldn't have affected her so deeply if she hadn't been so drained, her nerves frayed from an endless day of waiting and worrying and the awful fear that all her efforts would be in vain. As it was though...

Silently, she rose from her cot, casting a quick glance at Severus. He was deeply asleep, oblivious to her intentions as she slipped from the room.

## 62. Convalescence

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### Chapter 62: Convalescence

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As Lily stepped into the office, the portraits seemed to be collectively holding their breath. All except Dumbledore, who was perfectly composed, leaning back in his painted chair with his hands folded in his lap.

“Ah, Lily,” he said as she made her way toward the desk. “I was hoping you’d make an appearance. How is Severus?”

Unable to help herself, she scowled. “Like you care.”

“I *do* care. Probably more than you realize. Severus is...”

“You don’t seem surprised to see me,” she interrupted, dropping into the chair behind the desk and swiveling around to face him. “Why?”

“I’ve had a few hours to get over my shock.”

“No, that isn’t it. I saw the way you looked at me this morning. That wasn’t shock. It was... speculation. Like something you’d already suspected had just been confirmed.”

“I must say, Lily, you’ve grown quite perceptive over the years. Then again, you were always a clever girl.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. You *knew*, didn’t you? You knew I was alive.”

For the first time, Dumbledore looked uncomfortable. He cleared his throat, then said, “Yes, I had my suspicions. I know Severus better than anyone, after all. I could tell that...”

“Bullshit.”

His eyes widened slightly, though whether that was due to the profanity itself or the vehemence with which she spoke, Lily couldn’t say. She didn’t care, at any rate, shaking her head in exasperation as he continued.

“I’ve worked with Severus for many years. I understand his moods, his behaviors... above all things, he has always been a creature of habit. Even the slightest deviation from his routine...”

“Deviation?”

Dumbledore nodded. “When he came back to Hogwarts this year, I could see that he was... different. Happier, more at ease with himself. Naturally, I couldn’t help thinking...”

“That he had a woman hidden in his quarters?” She cocked an eyebrow. “Or to be more specific, a woman who’d supposedly been dead for nearly 20 years? That’s quite a stretch.”

“Not necessarily. Knowing Severus the way I do, how... single-minded he can be, I couldn’t imagine anything that could’ve caused such a significant change. Except...”

“Except me,” she said, giving him a skeptical look. “Right.”

“Do you find that so hard to believe? Well, perhaps you don’t know...”

“I know,” she said quietly. “I’m not questioning his devotion. What I’m *questioning* is why it was so easy for *you* to come to the conclusion that I was alive. You *knew* what had happened in Godric’s Hollow. You knew I was hit by the Killing Curse, that several people had seen my body. You were there for the burial, weren’t you?”

“I watched from a distance.”

She nodded. “Which means that you had no reason to think I wasn’t dead. Not then, and not in all the years since. How is it that nearly two decades later...”

“If there was one thing I learned in my lifetime,” the portrait interrupted, “it was that nothing is impossible. You were one of the people that taught me that. When Lord Voldemort struck you down, no one could have imagined that little Harry...”

“Don’t you *dare* talk about Harry! Just answer my question — the truth this time!”

“Lily...”

“Because there’s no way you figured it out just because Severus has been a bit less miserable. No way in hell. If you’d honestly thought I was dead all those years...” And then it hit her like a thunderbolt, her mouth falling open in disbelief. “Nick!”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me,” she said, rising from her chair. “Nick. He told you, didn’t he?”

But Lily didn’t need to hear his answer. His expression told her everything she needed to know, making her wonder how she’d failed to make the connection sooner. That first night she’d met Nick in the passage, the fact that he’d already known that she’d survived. Yes, and what else had he said? That Dumbledore had trusted him above all the other ghosts, allowing him unrestricted access to both the Headmaster’s quarters and the passages beyond. He’d told her that he’d been on the other side of the wall on the night Severus had made his promise, listening to him howl in anguish just before he’d sworn to protect Harry with his life.

That trust must have gone both ways. Which could only mean...

“My god,” she whispered. “You’ve known all along! You *knew*, and you *still*...”

“Now Lily, you must understand...”

“How soon did you find out? Was it on the same night I supposedly died? A few days after? I just want to know...”

He shook his head, his eyes growing vague. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t *matter*?” she echoed, slamming her hand down on the desk. “Like hell it doesn’t! I can’t believe you... and Severus... Harry... my god, how *could* you? You let them *believe*...”

“Yes, I knew *something* had happened.” Dumbledore’s voice was quiet, his expression subdued. “I knew your spirit hadn’t crossed over. But where you were or how you’d managed to escape? I couldn’t say. I explored a thousand possibilities, exhausted every theory I could think of, no matter how far-fetched. I searched for you for *years*, Lily. I found nothing.”

“You let them believe I was *dead*! You knew I wasn’t, and you still let them think...”

He shook his head. “It isn’t that simple.”

She dropped back into the chair, shaking so badly that she could no longer trust her legs to hold her upright. “You *used* them,” she said, her voice low pitched and trembling with fury. “Both of them. You took their pain, their grief and isolation, and you twisted it to your own advantage. That’s bad enough on its own — I’ve spent years hating you for what you’ve put them through. But to find out that you knew the truth all along, that you could’ve saved them so much suffering and grief...”

“It’s not that simple, Lily,” he repeated, leaning back in his chair with a heavy sigh. “I didn’t have a choice. I don’t expect you to understand, but...”

Shaking her head, she said, “*Everyone* has a choice.”

“Perhaps. But when the only other choice was watching the Wizarding world fall into darkness...”

She laughed, though there was no humor behind it. “Is that what you think? That they would’ve stood by and done nothing if you hadn’t been there to pull the puppet strings? If so, you’ve underestimated them both.”

“You can’t possibly know...”

“Oh, don’t patronize me!” she snapped. “I know a lot more than you think! Everything you’ve done, you... you make me *sick*!”

Dumbledore flinched, looking deeply wounded before regaining his composure. “Yes, I can understand why you’d feel that way. You love Harry, obviously, and it’s clear that you care for Severus, too.”

“Damn right, I do.”

“It’s... unfortunate that you don’t have the same faith in me, but I need you to hear me out.” When she didn’t respond, he continued. “Everything I’ve done... you may not agree with my actions, but this is the only way to make sure Lord Voldemort is defeated for good. *The only way*. If you were to interfere with our plans, steer Severus off course, or...”

“What are you asking me to do?”

“Leave Hogwarts,” he said, his expression intense. “Go into hiding. Let things play out as they will.”

“You want me to *leave*?”

“I think it would be for the best. So far, it seems that Severus has managed to keep your existence a secret, for which we must be extraordinarily grateful. But if Lord Voldemort were to discover that you’re alive, that his most trusted servant has been sheltering you...”

“That’s not going to happen,” she said, ignoring her earlier fear that Voldemort already knew.

“You can’t know that,” Dumbledore said gently. “Not for certain. To stay here means putting Severus’s life in grave danger. And what about Harry? Have you thought about what this could mean for him? If Severus is killed...”

“Not going to happen,” she repeated.

“I’d like to think so, too. But we’re talking about a madman, Lily, the most powerful Dark wizard in living memory. He’s already murdered countless people, including your own husband, not to mention nearly killing you and Harry, too. How you escaped that fate, I still don’t know, but you can’t pretend he isn’t a threat.”

So Nick hadn’t told Dumbledore about *Ligatis Animalia*? Interesting. He’d sworn he wouldn’t share her secret with anyone, of course, but it was nice to discover that he’d been telling the truth.

“Of course You-Know-Who is a threat. But if you think I’m going to turn tail and run, leave him behind like I’m some sort of coward...”

“Leave who?” Dumbledore said, giving her an inquisitive look. “Severus or Harry?”

The jab was subtle, but she caught it nonetheless, the implication that she’d chosen one over the other. It seemed his next tactic was to try and subdue her through her own guilt. Bastard.

Then again, he had no idea what she’d been through, that her separation from Harry had never been a matter of choice. Naturally, she still felt guilty — that was an inescapable part of being a mother. But she didn’t allow it to control her, and she’d be damned if she was going to let anyone else do it either.

“Severus,” she said quietly. “I’m not going to leave him. Not now, not ever. As for Harry... if you expect me to abandon him, to not be around to help him when the time comes? I’m afraid you’re sadly mistaken.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I admire your bravery, Lily. Truly, I do. But you have no place in this fight. You could do a lot more to protect them by taking yourself out of the line of fire. That isn’t cowardice. It’s...”

“You just want me out of the way,” she cut in. “That’s really what this is about, isn’t it? You’re terrified that I’m going to do something to spoil your plans. You know you can’t control me or manipulate me, and that scares the hell out of you.”

“That’s hardly fair. I’m simply trying to keep you safe. All three of you. To keep you alive so that...”

“So that Harry can die at the right moment.”

His eyes widened, his face growing pale as he stared down his nose at her. “You know?”

She snorted. “Of course I know. I heard you say it yourself. Harry is supposed to die, and Severus is the one who has to tell him.”



"I don't see how you could've..."

"Eavesdropped on you?" she finished for him. "I've been doing it for years, ever since Harry came to Hogwarts. Not much has happened in this office that I don't know about. So please — stop trying to convince me that all you care about is our safety. You've spent years grooming an innocent child to die for your cause, and what you've done to Severus..."

"I had no choice. You must understand..."

"What you've done to Severus is despicable. Using his grief against him, forcing him to risk his life day after day, year after year. And all for what?"

"I never forced Severus to do anything. He chose his own fate. What he's done has been in service to your memory, not..."

"Was it his choice to kill you?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "Or did you force his hand?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Regrettable," he said, his voice quiet. "But necessary."

"And I suppose it was *necessary* to deceive him all these years? To let him think his actions would save Harry's life?"

"Yes." He sighed, staring off into the distance. "Yes, that was necessary."

The logical part of her could see his point — Severus really had been the most powerful weapon he'd had, his best chance of eliminating Voldemort for good. He was also right in saying that Severus had volunteered for the job himself. But all of it seemed unnecessarily brutal somehow, as if he could've made things easier if he'd chosen to do so. That was the part she couldn't reconcile, the fact that he'd used Severus's pain, his grief and bitterness, had taken advantage of his deepest miseries to achieve the best possible results.

And that was the part she could never forgive.

As for Harry... she sighed, heaving herself to her feet. She wasn't ready to talk about that yet, didn't know how to do it without swearing up and down that Dumbledore was wrong, that Harry wasn't going to die. It seemed better to keep that conviction to herself... no telling what he'd do if he realized she intended to interfere with *that* part of his precious plan.

"Leaving so soon?"

"I've been here for over an hour," she said. "I need to get some sleep."

"Wait."

"For what?"

"Before you go, I'd like to know what you're planning to do. There are a lot of lives hanging in the balance."

"I'm well aware of that."

"So you'll consider my suggestion? At least say you'll consider it. I understand that you don't wish to leave Severus, but if you care about him as much as you claim..."

Turning around, she cocked an eyebrow at the portrait. "If Severus thinks it's best for me to leave, I'm sure he'll let me know. Otherwise, I'm staying right where I am."

“Lily...”

She didn’t respond, striding across the room and pulling the tapestry to one side.

“Lily!”

“What?” she snapped, spinning around on her heel.

“Just one more question, if you will.”

“Fine.”

He stared at her for a long moment, blue eyes bright with curiosity. “How did it happen? How did you survive?”

There was an edge of desperation to his voice, the result of dwelling on a question for nearly 20 years without ever finding the answer. Understanding his thirst for knowledge, his endless quest to know everything there was to know about the magical world, Lily could easily imagine how torturous it had been to spend all these years in the dark.

She opened her mouth, ready to tell him everything. But then she remembered that he wasn’t the only one who’d suffered in ignorance. For Severus and Harry, those years had been hellish, too, led to believe that she was dead simply because Dumbledore had felt he had the right to keep the truth from them. Severus blaming himself for her death, sick with grief and remorse... Harry believing there wasn’t a soul in the world who loved him until he’d come to Hogwarts...

So many secrets. So many lies. What had Dumbledore ever done to deserve the *truth*?

“Tell me,” he said, interrupting her thoughts.

“You want to know how I survived?”

“Please.”

“Magic.”

And with that, she slipped behind the tapestry, breathing a sigh of relief as she entered the Headmaster’s quarters.

Severus was still sleeping soundly, lying on his back with his head resting on one arm. He looked much better than he had earlier, though she could still see lines of exhaustion etched into his face, the dark circles under his eyes even more prominent than usual. Pulling the blanket up over his chest, she kissed him gently on the cheek, too tired to dwell on her confrontation with Dumbledore as she stripped off her robe and crawled into her cot.

For now, all that mattered was that it wasn’t too late. Not for Harry, and not for Severus either. Both of the men she loved were very much alive... one might still be beyond her reach, but the other was right here beside her, well on his way to recovery. As for their relationship... well, that too would be healed in time. As soon as he got his strength back, as soon as they could have a proper conversation...

With that, she lost her train of thought, yawning hugely as she flipped over onto her stomach.

“Goodnight, Severus,” she mumbled, comforted by the sound of his deep, steady breathing as she drifted off to sleep.

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When Severus opened his eyes, he was confronted by the most pleasant sight he could possibly imagine. Lily was lying on her side, fiery hair spread out across the pillow, her pale skin golden beneath the morning sunlight. She wasn’t naked, but close enough, only the tiniest scraps of lace to shield her from his gaze.

His body reacted instantly, a low groan rumbling in his throat as he reached out to touch her.

But then he groaned for another reason entirely, his muscles screaming in protest at the sudden movement. It all came back to him then — the fight, the summons, that endless night of torture, followed by hours upon hours of agonizing pain. But there was comfort in those memories, too — soothing words and gentle hands, the overwhelming relief of having Lily there beside him when he’d been convinced he’d lost her forever.

Pushing the blankets off, he lifted his head, staring down at his body in disbelief. His numerous cuts and gashes had been healed, nothing but faint silvery lines to indicate he’d ever been injured at all. And he was *clean* — no blood, no dirt, just smooth, pale skin, along with the faint fragrance of lemon soap. She’d cared for him better than he’d imagined, certainly better than he deserved. Granted, he was still tired and sore, but that was only to be expected. Nothing she could’ve done about that.

Shooting her another glance, this one filled with gratitude, he pushed himself up on his elbow, reaching for the glass of water he spotted on the bedside table. Only then did he notice the clock, its spindly hands informing him that it was just after 9 AM.

“Fuck,” he muttered, taking a few quick gulps before setting the glass down. What day was it? Sunday? No, *yesterday* had been Sunday, which explained why he’d been left to suffer in relative peace. But now...

Gritting his teeth, he sat up, reaching for the closest pair of trousers that looked relatively clean. Pulling them on, he left them unbuttoned, taking a deep breath before heaving himself to his feet. He nearly collapsed, his legs trembling violently, the room going dark around the edges. Closing his eyes, he struggled for control, reaching out to brace a hand against the wall as he hobbled toward the door.

It seemed to take forever, not helped by a need that was growing more urgent by the second. But he made it to the bathroom at last, relieving himself with a grunt of satisfaction before scrounging through the cabinet. Where was his Strength Potion? Something to help with the pain? The cabinet was nearly empty, offering nothing but Dreamless Sleep and a couple antidotes to poisons.

Well, he’d just have to do without.

He made his way back to the bedroom, pulling a clean robe from the wardrobe. By then, he was panting hard, forehead damp with sweat as he swayed on his feet. The pain was getting worse, too, nerve endings throbbing, muscles seeming to grow weaker by the second as he struggled to pull on the garment. He tried to ignore it, telling himself that it would pass.

All he had to do was make it to his office, settle himself in his chair and send down for a pot of strong black coffee. If necessary, he could even request some potions from the Hospital Wing. Yes, he just needed to...

Without warning, his legs gave out, sending him crashing to the floor. There was a sharp gasp, and then she was there beside him, green eyes wide with concern.

"Severus?"

"I'm fine," he said, clearing his throat in an attempt to make his voice sound more steady. "Just lost my balance, that's all."

"You are *not* fine," she said, sounding indignant. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I need to get to work."

"Are you mad?! Look at you! You can't go to work like this!"

"Don't have a choice."

She shook her head, laying a hand across his forehead. "You're feverish."

"Am I? Well, that explains it." He sucked in a deep breath, attempting to sit up. "As soon as I get to my office, I'll send down to the Hospital Wing for a Fever Reducer."

"No," she said. "Absolutely not.. I didn't go to all that trouble yesterday for nothing, you know. Now come on — let's get you back to bed."

"Lily, I can't. I have to..."

"Don't worry about work," she interrupted, taking the robe from his hands and shoving it back in the wardrobe. "Minerva has already agreed to cover for you."

"What?!" He stared at her, horrified. "Oh fuck, Lily. Tell me you didn't..."

She opened her mouth and closed it again, then slowly shook her head. "No, I didn't. Charity did."

"Charity?" he echoed, his breath coming in swift, panicked bursts. "I don't understand."

"Nothing to it," she said with a shrug. "Just a switch to an owl and a quick forgery."

"You... you forged a note from me? Tell me that Minerva doesn't know what happened. Please. If it got out that I'm... in a weakened condition, it would be a disaster. There'd be open rebellion, Order members infiltrating the school. It could easily mean blowing my cover, perhaps even..."

"Severus," she said, laying a hand on his chest. "It's fine. I only wrote that you had other things to attend to, that you'd appreciate it if she could take over the mundane business of running the school for the next few days."

"You used the word 'mundane'?"

She nodded. "Just seemed like something you'd say."

"Clever."

“Yes, I am. Now will you let me help you back to bed?”

He sighed, then nodded, managing to push himself to his feet before leaning on her for support. He really was exhausted, the dull throbbing of his nerves making him groan as she helped him across the room. But that didn’t stop him from appreciating her nearness, from closing his eyes momentarily as he breathed in the sweet fragrance of her hair. Part of him didn’t want it to end, and yet he couldn’t help feeling relieved as he sank back against the pillows.

“Severus?”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you want me to take your trousers off?”

His eyes snapped open. “What?”

“I just thought you’d be more comfortable.”

He nodded, lifting his hips as she reached for his waistband. “For future reference, Lily,” he said, his lips twitching. “The answer to that question is always ‘yes’.”

She didn’t respond, her cheeks turning crimson as she folded the trousers and set them on a chair. But just as he opened his mouth to apologize, deciding that the remark had been horribly inappropriate under present circumstances, she looked up at him and smiled.

“I’ll be sure to remember that.”

The comment was casual, almost flippant. Nonetheless, it gave him hope. Maybe there was still a chance for them? Maybe she *wasn’t* only doing this out of compassion, or a sense of obligation, or...

“Are you hungry?” she asked softly, interrupting his thoughts.

He wasn’t. Not really. But her expression was so hopeful that he couldn’t bring himself to tell her so. Instead, he nodded, accepting the pillow she placed behind him as he shifted into a sitting position. He wasn’t expecting much — biscuits, perhaps, or maybe some leftover sandwiches from the day before. But then she slipped on a robe and left the room, returning a few minutes later with a platter full of sausages, porridge, even an array of fresh fruits.

“How did you...” he started, before trailing off on a sigh. “The passages.”

“Of course,” she said matter-of-factly. “I knew we’d both need food, so I went and got some. I went down to the dungeon, too — brewed some more Blood Replenisher.”

“I see.”

On one hand, it was jarring to hear her speak about it so frankly. But on the other, he had to admit that he was glad she was being honest about it now. He still had a dozen questions, mostly revolving around her safety and the ever present risk of discovery. But he decided to let most of them go for the time being.

“Where did you brew it?”

“In your lab.”

He nodded, taking a small bite of sausage and washing it down with a bit of water. "And you were able to do so without being seen?"

"Yes. There's a door that leads directly to it."

"I never knew."

"You wouldn't have. Nick told me that the passages aren't even visible to anyone who doesn't have access to the Headmaster's quarters. I'm pretty sure that works for the doorways, too."

"Nick?"

"Yes. Nearly Headless Nick, you know."

"I'm well aware of who he is. However, I was *not* aware that he knew about *you*. Or that he had access to these quarters, for that matter. That will shortly be remedied."

"You don't have to do that."

"Don't I?" he said, raising one eyebrow.

She shook her head. "Nick can be trusted."

"I'm not questioning that. As it happens, the ghosts are incapable of revealing the Headmaster's secrets, or anything that might put the school in jeopardy. However, I *do* value my privacy. I'd prefer not to have him flitting in and out of here whenever he chooses."

"He wouldn't do that."

"No?"

"No," she said. "He already promised he wouldn't. Besides, if you revoke his permission, he won't be able to use the passages anymore."

"So?"

Her expression changed, becoming wistful. "It's just been nice to have a friend."

Pushing his plate away, Severus leaned back against the pillows, staring at her in silence. Sometimes it was easy to forget how different they were, at least in terms of human companionship. His own needs were minimal — as long as he had her, he saw no need to bother with anyone else. But she was naturally more outgoing, had always thrived on the company of others. Now more than ever, he understood how hellish it must've been for her to be shut away from the world for so many years. And even now, with her humanity fully restored, what did she have?

She had him, of course, but he was gone more often than not. Charity? She spent most of her time roaming around the castle these days, and besides, she was a cat. Better than nothing, he supposed, but not nearly enough.

"All right," he said, closing his eyes and resting his head against the headboard. "I'll leave things as they are."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

There was so much more to talk about. He knew that, and yet somehow, he couldn’t seem to find the words he needed. Words of gratitude. Words of contrition. Words that might help him figure out if there was anything he could do to regain her trust. There was no coherence to his inner musings, just a swirl of emotion underscored by weariness and discomfort.

“Severus?”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you want to take something? You look like you’re in pain.”

He opened his eyes to find her hovering beside him, her eyes brimming over with concern. It was on the tip of his tongue to deny it, to say that he was fine, but this wasn’t the time for pointless pride. What he needed was to recover, to get his strength back as soon as possible. There were duties that needed attending to, his precarious position to consider. But more than that, he simply hated feeling helpless, especially when she was the one who was forced to care for him.

And yet there was a part of him that enjoyed the attention, loving the touch of her hands as she reached out to pull the blanket up over his chest. No one had ever tended to him like she had. She might’ve lacked the skills of a professional healer, but her gentle words and soothing touches were the best treatment he could possibly imagine.

“Dreamless Sleep,” he said. “That’s about all we have left.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“I checked under the cabinet. There was nothing but...”

“Oh!” she interrupted, opening the drawer in the bedside table. “I brought them all in here. Wasn’t sure which ones you’d need.”

Wincing, he pushed himself up, leaning over to peer into the drawer. There were about half a dozen vials, their brightly colored contents shimmering in the morning sunlight. Sighing in relief, he laid back down, finally willing to admit that he was in a great deal of pain. That was far easier to do when he knew relief was within his reach.

“Maximo Remedium,” he said, shifting onto his side. “The green one.”

“I know which one it is.”

“Five drops.”

“Five?” she echoed, giving him an incredulous look.

“I’ve built up a bit of a tolerance over the years.”

“Oh.” Her features twisted, like she was the one in pain. But she didn’t question him further, reaching for the glass on the bedside table, her lips moving as she counted off the drops. Impressive — not only had she remembered the typical dosage, but she’d also recalled that it needed to be distilled in water.

Well, if she remembered that, she probably didn't need him to tell her that the potion would knock him out cold for the rest of the day.

"Thank you," he said, accepting the glass and lifting it to his lips. He took it down in several large swallows, already beginning to feel the effects as she plucked the cup from his hand. His head was so heavy that he couldn't hold it up any longer, hitting the pillow with a soft thud as he groaned in relief. The pain was gone, replaced by a warm drowsiness, eyelids fluttering closed...

But then he forced them open again, struggling to focus on her face. The sunlight was brighter than ever, illuminating her from behind, transforming her hair into a living flame.

He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, that he loved her beyond all reason. But he still had enough wits about him to realize that this wasn't the time for that. No, there was something else he needed to say, something he needed to know...

"Lily? Can you..." He swallowed hard, struggling to keep his voice from slurring. "Can you ever forgive me?"

There was a long pause, an endless silence that filled his heart with fear. But even as he squeezed his eyes shut, ready to accept the worst, he felt her hand on his head, fingers gently stroking his hair.

"I already have."



## 63. Forgiveness

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### Chapter 63: Forgiveness

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It had been three days since Lily had awoken to find Severus passed out in the hallway. Since then, he'd spent most of his time unconscious, but that was all part of the healing process. He was almost fully recovered now — he'd even managed to take a shower that morning without any fear that he'd collapse.

Nonetheless, she'd refused to let him dress for work, arguing that he needed to spend at least one more day in bed. Between her insistence and a message from Minerva informing him that everything was running smoothly, he'd finally agreed, taking a bit of Dreamless Sleep before napping away the afternoon.

Lily still hadn't told him the truth about Minerva. She'd wanted to the other morning, but between his weakened condition and obvious agitation, she'd known it wasn't the time. It had seemed better to wait until he'd regained his strength, especially since she wasn't the least bit worried that Minerva would reveal her secret.

Could the same be said for Dumbledore's portrait? She didn't think so, which was why she'd decided to tell Severus about their confrontation later that night. It wasn't something she'd wanted to do just yet, but she didn't want him to be blindsided when he returned to work tomorrow either.

In the meantime, she'd decided to make the most of their evening. Slipping away to the kitchens, she'd managed to swipe some roast beef and scalloped potatoes, even a lovely pudding for dessert. Carrying the food back in a basket she'd had the forethought to conjure, she pressed the button, only to hear him calling to her from the bedroom.

"Lily? Are you here?"

At least he didn't sound panicked this time, which was a huge improvement over the last time she'd gone missing.

"Coming!"

She hurried to the bedroom, setting the basket down before pausing to look at him. He was sitting up in bed, clad in nothing but a pair of loose black trousers. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him so well rested — the dark circles under his eyes were virtually nonexistent now, his skin naturally pale rather than sallow. But the biggest change was in his eyes, which were sharp and alert, sweeping over her from head to toe as she removed her cloak.

"Where have you been?"

"Dinner."

"I see."

"Well," she said, holding her hands out in a helpless gesture. "We needed to eat."

"I'm not disputing that. Next time though, perhaps you could leave a note?"

"I'm sorry. You're right — I should have. It's just that I'm used to..."

"You're used to making sure I *don't* find out," he said, though his lips twitched, taking the sting from his words. "I suppose we both need a little time to adjust."

Nodding, she picked up the basket, carrying it over to the bed. "Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

Soon enough, she was seated on the bed beside him, handing him a plate before fixing one for herself. Neither spoke, but it was a comfortable silence, one that lingered when the meal was finished.

And then finally, Severus said, "Show me."

"What?"

"Your passages. I want you to show me."

"Well technically," she said, setting their dishes aside. "They're yours."

"Either way, I'd like to see them."

"Are you sure you want to do that tonight? You need your rest, especially if you're going back to work tomorrow."

"I'm fine, Lily. Let's go."

She started to protest, but he was already out of bed, striding over to the wardrobe. The hesitation in his steps was gone, as were the slight tremors in his arms and legs. Looking at him now, it was hard to imagine he'd ever been injured at all, his every movement infused with restless energy as he wrapped himself in a light cloak.

"No shirt?" she asked him, faintly amused. "No robes?"

He shrugged. "If the passages are as private as you say, I don't see why it will make any difference."

"Good point. Where would you like to go first?"

Seating himself on the edge of the bed, he began to lace up his boots. "You said there were five?"

"Yes."

"One in the bathroom, and..."

"One in the study," she said, reaching for her own cloak. "One in the hallway, and another right next to the front door."

"I see. And the fifth?"

She stepped over to the opposite wall, tapping it with her finger. "Right here."

"Where?"

"Come closer."

Rising to his feet, he joined her, his brow furrowed as he studied the ornate wallpaper.

"Do you see it?" she said. "It's right..."

But before she could finish, he extended a finger, pressing the tiny silver button. The wall slid away, revealing the darkened passage that lay beyond.

"This one first," he said, ducking his head as he stepped through the opening. "*Lumos*."

Silently, she followed, expecting him to turn and ask where they were headed. But he didn't, walking with swift, sure strides until he reached the spot where four passages branched off in different directions. He held up his wand, illuminating the etchings on the wall.

*North to Gryffindor.*

*South to Slytherin.*

*East to Ravenclaw.*

*West to Hufflepuff.*

"I see," he said quietly. "So this is how you reached my lab?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

She nodded, lighting the tip of her own wand before she took the lead. They descended through the castle until finally, she veered left, following a smaller corridor until she reached the end. Pressing the button, she heard Severus suck in a sharp breath as the wall slid away. He stepped inside, pausing to let his eyes sweep across the room before he moved forward, fingers trailing over his equipment.

"You've missed it, haven't you?"

He shrugged, leaning over to inspect the cauldrons she'd used before studying the jars of ingredients she'd left out on the counter. "You came down here to make Blood Replenisher? While I was unconscious?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"I didn't have time to make anything else."

He grunted, picking up another jar and holding it up to the light. "Ptolemy. I didn't leave this here."

"Severus..."

"If *you* didn't use it, which clearly, you wouldn't have if you were simply making Blood Replenisher... who the bloody hell has been in my lab?"

She hadn't wanted to tell him. Not like this, when there were so many other issues that hadn't been resolved. But seeing the alarm in his eyes, the way they were darting suspiciously around the room, she saw no other choice.

"No one," she said, plucking the bottle from his hand. "That is, I'm the one who used it. Not the other day, but on Saturday. I can't believe it's been less than a week..."

He relaxed, the panic in his expression giving way to curiosity. "Why did you need Ptolemy? What were you brewing?"

She hesitated. "Fertility potion."

"What? Why would you..."

"I was afraid it wasn't going to happen any other way."

He frowned. "It's only been a couple months. These things take time."

"Yes, you've told me that before." She pulled a stool out from under the counter, taking a seat before she continued. "But you have no idea what it's been like. Waiting and waiting, feeling so disappointed when it didn't happen. And then I was late. I was so excited... almost told you that morning. But then right after you left... well, I realized that I wasn't."

"I see," he said quietly. "If I put too much pressure on you, if I made you think..."

"No," she interrupted, shaking her head. "No, you didn't. It's just that after everything that happened to me, I was afraid it might be impossible. I needed to know one way or the other, sooner rather than later."

"There's nothing wrong with you, Lily," he said, grabbing a stool for himself. "You function quite well in every other respect, yes? Why should this be any different?"

"It seems foolish. I know. It's just..."

"Not foolish," he interrupted. "Unnecessary."

"I just wanted it to happen so badly."

"I know." He paused, letting out a heavy sigh. "But perhaps this just isn't the time."

Lily could feel her throat tightening, her eyes filling with tears. Desperate to change the subject, she said, "That's how I found out, you know. About Harry. I came down here to make the potion, and on my way back... that's when I overheard you talking with the portrait."

"Unfortunate timing."

She sniffled, letting out a little laugh. "You might say that."

"I'm sorry. What I did was stupid. Thoughtless. Utterly..."

"Severus, don't. Just promise that it won't happen again. When it comes to Harry, I need you to tell me the truth. No matter what."

He nodded. "I promise."

She hesitated, then said, "For what it's worth, I'm sorry, too."

"The passages? I don't blame you, Lily. It was unrealistic to think I could keep you shut away indefinitely. Foolish, too. If I hadn't returned..."

"It would've been my fault."

"What?" His eyes widened. "Why would you think that?"

"That's why you were punished, right? Because of me?"

He laughed, shaking his head as he stared up at the ceiling. "Lily," he said, finally meeting her eyes again. "If he'd had the slightest inkling you were here, that I'd been hiding you all this time, I'd be dead right now."

"You weren't far off."

"No," he agreed. "But if he'd wanted to finish the job, he would have. *Not* killing me was a conscious choice rather than an oversight. I can assure you of that."

"Then why..."

"Why did he punish me?"

She nodded.

"Frustration. Impatience. A streak of madness combined with the need to make an example out of someone."

"Oh," she said quietly, thinking about her conversation with Dumbledore's portrait. Had he been right? Was it selfish of her to stay here with Severus? Maybe he'd be better off if she *did* go into hiding, somewhere far away where she couldn't possibly put him at risk. Unable to help herself, she asked him, holding her breath as she waited for his response.

He gave her a sharp look, his face paler than it had been just a moment before. "Do you want to leave? If so, I can certainly make arrangements."

"I don't *want* to. I just don't want to put you in even more danger than you're already in. If something happened to you because of me... well, I don't think I could take that."

He relaxed, lips twitching into a small smile. "You underestimate me."

"Do I?" she said. "You're only human, Severus. If you slipped up, even once..."

"I won't."

He said it with such certainty, such absolute conviction that it would've been useless to argue. Instead, she said, "Well, what about the passages? Aren't you worried someone will see me?"

"That was my first thought, yes. But that was before I realized something."

"What was that?"

"That I trust you, Lily. Your behavior might seem... reckless at times, but in the end, I think you know what you're doing. If you say the passages are safe, then I believe you. Besides, from what I've seen so far..." He paused, glancing around the lab. "You were right."

No one is likely to find you here. And once I strengthen the wards, it'll be more or less impossible."

"What about the rest?"

"Well, I'd like to take a look at them. Not tonight, perhaps, but soon. If there seems to be any danger, I can put extra protections in place. Besides, if worse comes to worse, you *do* have a wand. You're quite capable of defending yourself, especially since you'd have the advantage. Anyone who stumbled across you would be too shocked to react immediately. You could always Obliviate them. Or Stun them, depending on who it is. There's also Disillusionment, and..."

And then suddenly, Lily couldn't help herself. Rising to her feet, she took his face between her hands, kissing him full on the lips. She wasn't expecting his reaction, his mouth opening with a shuddering groan as his arms went around her, holding her so tight it almost hurt. Before she knew it, his hands were everywhere — sliding up and down her back, gripping her shoulders, burying themselves in her hair as he took control, kissing her so hard it left her gasping for breath.

If she'd allowed it, she knew he would've taken her right then and there, would've laid her down on the counter and had his way with her. As it was though, she took a step backward, flashing him a sheepish smile.

He was panting hard, the desire in his eyes unmistakable. But beneath that was something far more profound — overwhelming gratitude mingled with relief.

Had he honestly thought things were over between them? Despite her forgiveness, despite the way she'd cared for him for the past few days? It seemed illogical... downright absurd, really. But she had to remember that in this, at least, he was fragile, prone to believe the worst if she left him even the slightest room for doubt.

"Severus?"

"Yes?" he said, his voice unsteady.

"I love you."

She hadn't realized how badly he'd needed to hear those words until she saw his reaction. He closed his eyes, exhaling loudly as he slumped against the counter.

"I love you," she repeated, reaching out and taking his hand. "I forgive you, and I have no intention of leaving you. Not now, not ever. I'm yours."

"Mine?" he whispered, his voice choked.

"Yours."

Pulling her closer, he sank down on his stool, his arms going around her as he rested his head on her chest. She opened her mouth to say something else, but then she closed it again, sensing that this wasn't the time. Instead, she just let him hold her, stroking his hair with gentle fingers until at last, he released her, rising to his feet.

"We should get back."

“All right,” she said, smiling to herself as she noticed his expression. Any trace of tension was gone, harsh features softened by a look of quiet satisfaction. He seemed younger somehow, almost boyish — really, it was a shame that no one else ever saw him this way. No one would be able to think of him as some unfeeling tyrant if they were able to see the warmth in his eyes, the gentle look he gave her as he took her hand and led her from the room.

Soon enough, they were back in their quarters, cloaks removed and left to hang in the wardrobe. Only then did she realize how tired he was, watching him lift a hand to his mouth to stifle a yawn as he dropped onto the bed.

“Do you need a potion?”

“No, thank you. I’m not in any pain.” He removed his boots and then laid down, scooting over to make room for her. “Would you like to join me?”

Laughing at his formality, she crawled into bed beside him, giving him a moment to get comfortable before she laid her head on his chest. His arms came around her, his fingers stroking her back as she felt him sigh. She expected him to fall asleep then, but he didn’t, a palpable tension in the air as they lay there in silence.

“Severus?” she finally said, lifting her head to gaze down at him. His eyes were wide open, staring out the window at the nighttime sky. “What’s wrong?”

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More than anything, Severus wanted to let it go, to save this particular conversation for another time. The evening he’d just spent with Lily had been more wonderful than he could’ve hoped for, her love doing more to restore him than all the potions he’d taken over the past few days. But that blissful feeling was also why he felt compelled to tell her the truth now. No more secrets, no more lies.

“I need to tell you something,” he said quietly. “About the... about our attempts to conceive.”

He watched her expression change, curiosity giving way to unmistakable pain. “You’ve changed your mind. Right. I understand.”

“It isn’t that. I...” He trailed off, letting out a heavy sigh. “I wasn’t completely honest. About my reasons for wanting to go through with it, that is.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. “Knowing what I knew about Pott... about Harry, it just seemed like...”

Abruptly, she sat up, her eyes wide with disbelief. “No. You didn’t...”

“I thought it might help. That...”

“That you could just replace one child with another and everything would be okay? Severus, it doesn’t work that way!”

“Of course not. It wasn’t about *replacing* the boy.” He paused, raking a hand through his hair. “It was about giving you something else to live for. A reason to keep fighting.”

"I see," she said stiffly. "Just another ploy to keep me from getting myself killed."

"No, I..." But then he stopped, realizing she was right. "Yes. But that was before all of this. Before I realized..."

"Realized *what*?" she snapped. "That you can't control everything that happens to me?"

"I'm sorry, Lily. Everything I've done... I only wanted to keep you safe."

To his horror, she started to cry, burying her face in her hands. He tried to touch her shoulder but she shrugged him off, moving to the other side of the bed.

"Lily, please."

For several long moments, she said nothing. And then finally, she lifted her head, her eyes brimming over with tears as she stared up at the ceiling. "I'm such an idiot."

"What? No."

"Yes," she said, letting out a laugh, though there was no humor behind it. "Oh, I was suspicious at first. When you told me you wanted a baby, I couldn't begin to imagine why. Especially when you wanted to get me pregnant right away, despite the war and everything else. But the more you tried to convince me, the more I believed you. It still seemed strange, but I wanted it so much that I didn't care."

"I'm sorry," he repeated, not knowing what else to say. "I only..."

"Only wanted to protect me? To make sure I had something to hold onto?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "That part I can understand, I guess. But that's not the part that hurts."

"You're hurt that I lied."

"It's more than that," she said, still refusing to meet his eyes. "I don't know how to make you understand."

"Try."

"All right." She paused to take a deep breath. "Yes, I *do* want another child, but... not if I can't share it with someone who wants it as much as I do. When I started to believe that you did, it changed everything. It was like all the things I wanted might be possible, like..."

"We can still have a child," he interrupted, hating the pain in her eyes. "If that's what you want."

"No, Severus. That's not the point. It would have to be something we *both* wanted. Otherwise, it wouldn't be right."

"What I want is to make you happy."

She shook her head. "This isn't the kind of thing you should do just to please someone else. It isn't..."

"Lily..."



"It's okay," she said. And then finally, she looked at him, flashing him a wan smile. "I'll adjust. I mean, I already figured I'd have to forget about having a child if I wanted to be with you. It just would've been easier to accept if you hadn't spent all this time convincing me I was wrong."

"Maybe you were."

"What?"

He sighed, leaning back against the headboard. "In the beginning, yes, I'll admit that it was all for your sake. But once we started trying, my feelings... changed. I began to think that I wouldn't mind so much, that maybe..."

"Severus, don't do this. Please."

"Do what?"

"Don't lie to me. Not again. Maybe you didn't understand before, but now? It's cruel. I know you don't mean it that way, but..."

"Lily, I'm not lying. What I felt..." He trailed off, giving her a helpless look. How was he supposed to explain it? It wasn't something he could put into words, just a mass of emotion and instinctive urges that defied all description. "Truthfully, I'm not sure what I felt. All I know is that the idea of having a child appealed to me, far more than I ever thought it would."

She still looked skeptical.

"Pick up your wand," he said quietly.

"What?"

"Your wand. I may not be able to tell you what I felt, but perhaps I can show you."

She reached for her wand and then hesitated, giving him a dubious look. "Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't."

Patently, he waited, until finally, she moved to sit in front of him.

*"Legilimens."*

It was an odd sensation after Voldemort's brutal invasions, her touch so light that he hardly knew she was there. Carefully, he began to separate his memories, tucking quite a few of them behind his shields before locating the ones he wanted her to see. He pushed them to the forefront, holding his breath as he felt her skimming along the surface.

He saw them the way she did, a mishmash of conflicting thoughts and emotions, all revolving around the idea of getting her pregnant. Not the fear that he wouldn't be around to see the child — he kept that part to himself. But he *did* show her his worries, his fears, underscored by that strange excitement that had come upon him when he'd imagined their potential offspring. A combination of vivacity and shrewd cunning, their individual talents merging together in a child that would no doubt be brilliant.

And there were the little things, too — wondering if the baby would inherit her eyes, her beautiful red hair... what it would be like to hold that child and know that it was his. He made

sure she was aware of that peculiar sensation he'd felt when he'd imagined her pregnant, equal parts proud and possessive, that instinctive urge that had come upon him whenever they'd made love. The need to leave something of himself deep within her, to let it take root and watch it grow. To know he was creating something permanent, tangible proof of his love for her, something that would bind them together for the rest of their lives.

Satisfied, he let the memories fade, feeling his body relax as she finally withdrew.

"Severus..." She stared at him, her eyes wide as she pressed a hand to her mouth.

"Do you believe me now?" he said, his voice low and intense.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Good. I'm sorry for..."

"No, don't be sorry. Please. It's better this way."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if you hadn't shown me, I would've never known. Deep down, I would've always wondered why you'd done it, no matter what reasons you might've given me. But now..." She paused, then continued in a rush. "We can wait, you know. It doesn't have to happen right now. Just knowing this is something we *both* want? That's enough for me."

He nodded, sighing in relief. Now that he'd set his original reason aside, that urgent need to get her pregnant as soon as possible for her own protection, he had to admit that the timing couldn't be worse. Before, it had been easy to ignore the practicalities — those had seemed trivial compared with the thought of saving her life. But their situation was indeed tenuous — perhaps it would be better not to tempt fate.

Of course, there was his own fate to consider. He'd been trying not to think about that, still desperate to pretend they had a future together. But he still had a little more time, didn't he? The boy was nowhere to be found, and at least three of the Horcruxes were still intact. It might be months before they came to the final confrontation, perhaps as much as a year or two. He'd know when that moment was drawing closer, could make certain... provisions before his time was nigh. Charms, potions, whatever it took.

Granted, it wouldn't be easy. Knowing he wouldn't be there to see their child born, that he'd never even have the chance to see it growing inside her? That hurt him more than he was willing to admit. But she'd be better off that way, free to carry their baby and bring it into the world in a time of peace.

"Severus?" Lily said softly, interrupting his thoughts.

He cleared his throat. "Yes. We'll hold off for now, until the timing is more ideal."

To his surprise, she didn't look disappointed. No, her eyes were shining with contentment as she laid back down, a small smile gracing her lips. He lowered himself onto the pillows, turning on his side and drawing her into his arms.

She came willingly, pressing her face against his chest.

"Thank you," she said, her voice muffled. "For telling me the truth."

“Of course,” he said, closing his eyes as he buried his nose in her hair. Suddenly, he was exhausted, not bothering to resist the warm drowsiness that overtook him. Exhaustion? Or was it relief? He hadn’t realized how much it had drained him to carry around so many secrets, nor how comforting it could be to have them all out in the open. There was nothing standing between them now, nothing to stop them from...

Well, there was the matter of his impending death, but he’d never had any intention of mentioning that one. This was war, after all. Lily could hardly think his survival was guaranteed. Besides, there was always a small chance that...

He lost his train of thought, distantly hearing her voice as he struggled to regain his focus. Something about Dumbledore... portraits... what was that? It seemed important, yet the more he tried to understand, the less the words made sense. They merged together seamlessly, a soft, pleasant sound that followed him into the land of dreams.

## 64. Unanticipated Encounters

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### Chapter 64: Unanticipated Encounters

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“Shit,” Lily whispered, staring down at the empty place beside her.

When Severus had fallen asleep, she’d shrugged it off, figuring she’d tell him about Dumbledore in the morning. She’d planned on staying up all night just to be sure she didn’t miss him, figuring she could catch up on her sleep after he went to work. But as she’d lain there in his arms, surrounded by warmth and comfort, it had been all too easy to let her eyes drift closed.

Just for a moment, she’d promised herself. Then she’d get up and make a strong pot of tea.

Unfortunately, that *moment* had turned into seven hours, the clock on the wall showing her that it was well past 9 AM.

“Nothing I can do about it now,” she muttered, heaving herself out of bed with a regretful sigh.

She headed for the bathroom, deciding that a hot bath was just what she needed to melt away her tension. Filling the tub with warm water and a mountain of lavender foam, she shed her clothes, submerging herself with a sigh of satisfaction. She leaned her head against the wall, closing her eyes as she began to process everything that had happened the night before.

Severus really *did* want a baby.

That was her first thought, one that improved her mood tremendously. Granted, he’d made it clear that he wanted to wait, but that didn’t bother her as much as she might’ve expected. Not when she’d seen irrefutable proof of his feelings, when she knew that when the time finally came, he wouldn’t be doing it just for her sake.

Yet despite that, she was troubled, remembering all the things they *hadn’t* discussed. Well, one thing, really, since the rest seemed trivial in comparison.

Harry.

What could she have said? Should she have told him that she’d already decided Harry wasn’t going to die? That somehow, she’d find a way to save him? She already knew how he would’ve responded, that same quiet insistence that she was in denial. In the end, what would that have accomplished, other than leading to another fight?

Besides, he was aware of her feelings on the subject. She’d made them quite clear when they’d argued in the bathroom that day. It seemed best to leave it at that, at least for the time being.

More than anything? She wanted peace between them. She needed to feel close to him again, to strengthen their bond before something else came along to test it. Of course,

Dumbledore's portrait might do just that.

Lily sighed as she crawled out of the tub, throwing on a loose robe before she headed to the study. She needed something to distract her, scanning the bookshelves for anything that looked remotely interesting. Finally, she chose a thick volume of Transfiguration spells, hoping it would keep her occupied for at least a couple hours.

No more than five minutes later, she set it down again, rising to pace the room.

It was going to be a long day.

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Severus sighed, sifting through the mountain of paperwork that was strewn across his desk.

Minerva had taken care of some of it, at least. There was a neat stack sitting off to one side, sheets of parchment filled with her small, elegant script. But there was plenty more that had piled up overnight — missives from the Ministry, proposals from textbook authors who wanted their work to be included in next year's curriculum. And naturally, there was a heap of letters from parents, concerned over their children's education and general welfare.

Frowning, he picked up another letter, scrutinizing its contents. It was addressed to Minerva, a personal message that appeared to have come from a family member. He started to drop it into the slot, knowing the house elves would make sure it reached its intended recipient. But then he changed his mind, grabbing a blank piece of parchment and scribbling a note of his own.

*Minerva, it said. Please report to me at your earliest convenience.*

Before he knew it, the woman in question was settling herself into the chair on the other side of the desk, waiting quietly until he set his quill down.

"For you," he said, sliding the letter across the desk.

"Ah, yes," she responded, her voice sounding — well, not *friendly*, perhaps, but far more neutral than it usually did. "Thank you, Headmaster."

Had she just called him *Headmaster*? Without being prompted to do so? Unusual, to say the least.

"Is there anything you wish to tell me?"

Her expression turned wary, eyes narrowing slightly as they met his. "Such as?"

"Well, you've been overseeing my duties for the past four days. Have there been any problems? Anything I need to know?"

Visibly relaxing, she nodded. "Those despicable Carrows..."

"Those are your colleagues," he interrupted. "You might want to refer to them with a little more respect."

"Do *you* respect them?"

For a long moment, there was silence, her eyes scrutinizing him as he searched for a proper response. Why would she even bother to ask him such a thing? Hadn't she long since decided that he was evil, every bit as treacherous as the other Death Eaters? He'd certainly thought so, but the look she was giving him now... strange, but it was as if she hadn't quite figured him out.

He knew what he *should* do. He should tell her in no uncertain terms that he approved of the Carrows, along with any actions they might've taken in his absence. That would certainly be the safest option, one designed to keep his cover intact.

But he couldn't bring himself to do it. No, not when this was the first time in months that she'd looked at him with anything other than pure hatred in her eyes. He still couldn't imagine what had changed, but... well, he wasn't exactly eager to go back to the way things had been before.

"How I feel about them is irrelevant," he said stiffly. "In times like these, we must all make certain... concessions."

Minerva nodded, her expression satisfied.

"What did they do?"

"Well," she said, her features twisting into a scowl. "First they tried to undermine my authority. They kept insisting that you would've wanted *them* in charge of the school in your absence. Fortunately, since they had no proof of that, there was nothing they could do. Only an official order from you could've disrupted the natural hierarchy."

He nodded.

Was that the reason for her peculiar behavior? The fact that she'd been entrusted to look after the school, rather than him appointing someone else in her stead? Had that led her to the conclusion that he might not be as bad as he seemed, that maybe he *didn't* see her as the enemy?

More importantly, if she *did* have these suspicions, could she be trusted to keep them to herself?

Naturally, he couldn't ask her that. No, not without making his true allegiance known, which could easily place them both in danger.

"Anything else?" he questioned instead.

"Nothing beyond the usual."

There was no need to ask her what that meant. Constant surveillance and severe punishments, multiple children ending up in the Hospital Wing each day. Despicable indeed, though he supposed he should be grateful that the Carrows hadn't used his absence as an excuse to wreak even more havoc than they usually did.

"Very well," he said. "You may go."

She rose from her seat, heading for the door. But just as she reached it, she glanced back over her shoulder, scrutinizing him all over again with that strange look in her eyes.

“Good day, Headmaster.”

“Ah, good day, Minerva.”

As soon as she was gone, he ordered another pot of coffee, sipping it slowly as he struggled to focus on his paperwork. It was a useless effort. Between the constant upheaval of the past few days and Minerva’s odd behavior, it was nearly impossible to settle down to the mundane tasks he’d more or less forgotten during his absence. Bloody hell, he hated paperwork. As absurd as it seemed, he sometimes wished he was back in the dungeon, attempting to teach Potions to a bunch of inattentive brats who wouldn’t have known the difference between Belladonna and porcupine quills.

Indeed, his old job has been stressful, frustrating, and often annoying. But at least it had never bored him.

“I must say, Severus, you’re looking much better.”

Suppressing a sigh, he turned to face the portrait. Was it too much to ask to be left alone with his thoughts, if only for a little while?

“I’m fine now. Thank you for your concern.”

“An impressive recovery,” Dumbledore said, watching him closely. “Miraculous, one might say.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“If you’d ended up in St. Mungo’s or the Hospital Wing, perhaps not. But alone in your quarters? One can’t help but wonder how you managed it.”

Severus shrugged. “Potions. Rest. The usual.”

“I see. And you managed to administer these potions to yourself?”

“Yes.”

“You healed your own injuries?”

“Obviously.”

“Even though you lost so much blood that you were lying on the floor unconscious?” Dumbledore leaned back in his painted chair, folding his hands in his lap. “Even though your nerves were so damaged that you couldn’t hold onto your wand?”

“This is hardly the first time I’ve been injured thanks to the Dark Lord. I’ve learned to make certain provisions.”

“I don’t doubt that, Severus. You always were clever. But cleverness can only take us so far.”

Severus sighed, setting his cup down. “What, precisely, is your point?”

“That even you, as talented as you are, could not have accomplished the impossible. Besides, taking all of the credit? That’s hardly fair to Lily. I’m sure she’s done a great deal to aid your recovery.”

Feeling the color drain from his face, Severus stared up at the portrait, his mouth opening and closing several times. And then finally, he spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. “What?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Lily Potter. She’s the one you’ve been hiding in there all this time, yes?”

“You can’t possibly believe...”

“Oh, I *believe* lots of things. And then there are others I know for a fact. There’s no point in denying it, Severus. I’ve seen her.”

“How?”

“You don’t remember? Well no, I suppose you wouldn’t. You *were* unconscious at the time, after all.”

Suddenly, Severus started to remember — that agonizing crawl across the office, slamming his shoulder against the door in a fit of desperation. There was nothing after that, only a vague memory of waking up in his own bed with Lily hovering beside him, followed by a relentless struggle not to scream as spasms had wracked his body. He hadn’t really thought about it, assuming he’d made it all the way into their quarters. But obviously, he hadn’t. He must’ve fainted before he’d ever made it across the threshold.

The rest was easy to figure out. Lily must’ve found him there, giving no thought to the portraits as she’d rushed to his side.

“So,” he said quietly, fighting back a wave of panic. “You know my secret now.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore agreed. “Though I have yet to hear your explanation.”

“What is it you’d like to know?”

“Why you chose to lie about something so important. That would be a good start. I’d also like to know...”

Recovering his wits somewhat, Severus raised an eyebrow. “I might ask you the same thing.”

“Surely you already know the answer to that. I chose to keep things to myself as a matter of necessity. I couldn’t run the risk of anything spoiling our plans.”

“Interesting. That’s precisely why I’ve chosen to keep Lily hidden. If the Dark Lord knew she was alive, it would be...”

“A disaster,” Dumbledore finished for him. “Yes, I’d have to agree. But that doesn’t explain why you felt the need to hide it from *me*.”

“Because,” Severus started. “Because I...” What could he say? What explanation could he possibly give other than the truth?

Then again, why did he need to explain himself at all?

“I had my reasons,” he finally said, meeting Dumbledore’s eyes without flinching. “Besides, as I’ve stated before, my private life is none of your concern.”



The portrait chuckled. “Ah, Severus. I’m afraid you don’t have the luxury of a private life. If Lily Potter is involved? That’s doubly true. If Lord Voldemort *were* to find out...”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes,” Severus said, his voice firm. “I do.”

“You can’t control everything, my boy.” Dumbledore paused, folding his hands in his lap. “Oh, I’ll admit you’ve done a good job of it so far. Better than anyone else could have done. But we’ve only made it this far due to a couple of very important factors.”

“Which are?”

“The fact that you’ve acted alone. That no one except you and I have had the slightest inkling of the truth.”

“I *still* act alone,” Severus said quietly. “If you think, even for a second, that I’d get Lily wrapped up in all of this...”

“Honestly, I don’t see where that can be avoided. Unless, of course, you send her away.”

“Pardon?”

“Send her away,” Dumbledore repeated. “Let her go into hiding. Somewhere far from Hogwarts. Far from England, if at all possible. That would be the safest solution.”

“For whom?”

“For everyone.”

“No,” Severus said, shaking his head. “It would be the safest solution for *you*. That’s what this is really about, isn’t it? Your need to control everything, this compulsion to make sure everything unfolds *exactly* the way you planned.”

“It is the only way...”

“Yes, you’ve said that all along. But *is* it?”

For the first time, Dumbledore looked nervous. “Of course it is. Now more than ever, we cannot afford distractions. We can’t allow anything to steer us off course. The fate of the Wizarding world hangs in the balance — Severus, you know this. You know...”

“I know that you thrust all of this onto my shoulders... because I was the only one capable of handling it, yes?”

“Yes. However...”

“Then why not trust those capabilities? I’ve spent nearly twenty years in your service, Dumbledore. When have I ever failed you? When have I done anything to jeopardize our cause?”

“Never. But Severus...”

“No matter what task has been required of me, I’ve done it. No matter how distasteful, dangerous, repugnant, I’ve done it. Yes, and I’ve done it *well*. Can you deny that?”

Dumbledore shook his head. "You have both met and exceeded all my expectations. But you've also done so under specific conditions."

"Because I've been bitter. alone. Driven half mad with grief?"

"Yes."

"I see." Severus reached for his coffee, taking a long sip before he continued. "So in your estimation, I must be miserable in order to perform as expected."

"I have no wish to see you miserable, Severus. But you must admit that it gives you a... singular focus. As I said, we cannot afford distractions. We can't..."

"Lily is not a distraction."

"She's dangerous," Dumbledore said gently. "No, don't try to deny it. She doesn't have the discipline you do. What's to stop her from putting herself in danger, from letting her emotions get the better of her? She's... headstrong, Severus. Unpredictable. She's..."

"I don't need you to tell me who she is," Severus said, his voice cold. "I know her far better than you ever will."

"Perhaps, but you can't deny that she's in a precarious position. Nor can you deny that her first instinct is to protect the people she loves."

Severus shrugged.

"As is yours. If she was in danger, can you honestly say that you wouldn't do everything in your power to save her? If it came down to maintaining your cover or saving her life, what would you do?"

"I'd prevent a situation like that from happening in the first place. That's what I do."

Dumbledore shook his head, letting out a heavy sigh. "Send her into hiding, Severus. That's the only way to be sure."

"Is it? That's what you told me last time. You swore you'd put them somewhere where the Dark Lord could never touch them. You promised you'd keep her safe."

"As I told you before, Lily and James put their faith in the wrong person. There was nothing I could do."

"Perhaps not," Severus agreed. "But that's precisely my point. Back then, there was only so much either of us could do to intervene. I was helpless, with no choice but to leave her fate in someone else's hands. That's a mistake I do not intend to repeat."

"Severus..."

"And we mustn't forget that Lily has a say in the matter, too. It's her life, after all, not yours or mine. Though I can't begin to imagine why, she wishes to stay here with me. In fact, she's been quite adamant about it."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, his voice thoughtful. "She certainly has."

"What?" Severus's head snapped up, his eyes widening. "You've *spoken* with her? When?"

“The other night. I imagine you were asleep by then — it had been a long day for you.”

“The day I was injured?”

Dumbledore nodded. “She came out to speak to me. Not the most pleasant conversation, but I must admit it was good to see her after so many years. I only wish it had been under different circumstances.”

“What did she say?”

“Well,” Dumbledore said. “I’ll be happy to tell you. But first, I’d like you to answer a question for me.”

“Yes?”

“How did she survive?”

Severus hesitated, feeling unnerved by the intensity in Dumbledore’s eyes. Granted, there was no reason not to tell him, and yet something made him hold his tongue. Abruptly, he realized what it was, giving the portrait a sharp look as he said, “She didn’t tell you herself?”

“I’m sure she meant to, but...”

Just then, there was a knock on the door, soft but insistent. Sighing in relief, Severus commanded his visitor to enter, watching quietly as Professor Flitwick shuffled into the room.

“Sev... Headmaster Snape,” he said, his voice squeaking. “I was wondering if we could discuss some minor changes to my curriculum.”

“Of course,” Severus said smoothly. “Please have a seat.”

And that was the end of it. The rest of the day was uneventful, helped by the fact that there were no opportunities for Dumbledore to interrogate him any further. The portrait tried to capture his attention later in the evening, of course, after the constant interruptions had ceased. But by then, Severus was weary to the bone, ignoring the sound of his name as he trudged over to the tapestry and let himself into his quarters.

## 65. Trust and Certainty

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### Chapter 65: Trust and Certainty

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Severus didn't spare so much as a glance for Lily. Silently, he shrugged off his robes, tossing them aside as he headed straight for the firewhiskey. Snatching up a glass, he filled it to the brim, gazing out the window across the darkened grounds as he lifted it to his lips.

"Severus?"

In response, he took a long swallow, swiftly followed by another. And then finally, he spoke.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did," Lily said, biting her lip as she stared at his rigid back. "I mean, I tried. I didn't realize you'd already fallen asleep."

Slowly, he turned to face her, giving her a skeptical look. But then his expression turned thoughtful, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Ah," he said after a moment. "Yes, I suppose you did. Nonetheless, I'd appreciate..."

"You want an explanation."

"Yes."

Lily sighed, leaning her head back against the couch. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for him to see me. Honestly, I didn't. When I saw you lying there... what else could I have done?"

"I'm not questioning that. I simply wish to know why you chose to speak with him later that night. That part, at least, was hardly unavoidable."

"I beg to differ."

"Indeed?" He frowned, setting his glass down. "Explain."

"I've been waiting for years, Severus. Ever since he dumped Harry and me off on Petunia's doorstep, I've wanted... no, I've *needed* to know why he's done the things he's done. Why can so much of the pain in our lives be traced back to him? I want to understand..."

As she trailed off, she heard a sigh, followed by the soft thud of footsteps. Severus sat down beside her, waiting quietly until she lifted her head to look at him.

"Lily," he said, obviously making an effort to sound gentle. "War is a messy, treacherous business. You know that as well as I do. Granted, I'll admit that some of Dumbledore's actions have been... questionable. But I don't think that hurting any of us has ever been his intention. It's just a regrettable side effect, an unfortunate part of..."

“No,” she interrupted, struggling to keep her temper under control. “No, Severus. Don’t excuse his actions.”

“*Accepting* isn’t necessarily *excusing*.”

“Well fine! Don’t *accept* them either!”

He shrugged, gazing off toward the window. “I don’t have a choice.”

“How can you say that?”

“He was the most powerful wizard in existence, Lily. Even in death...”

“Tell me something,” she said, her voice quiet. “If he really *was* that powerful, why did he need a child to fight his battles for him? Why force you and Harry to suffer so much rather than dealing with You-Know-Who himself?”

“The Horcruxes...”

“Ah, yes. The bloody Horcruxes. So he had no choice in the matter, did he? He had to set Harry up to be the sacrifice, had to...”

“Yes.”

Lily smiled, shaking her head. “You know, even if I believed that, it still doesn’t excuse everything else he’s done. Do you really think he couldn’t have found a better home for Harry? That he couldn’t have saved him from all those years of loneliness and neglect?”

“Petunia’s blood...”

“Was supposed to protect him, yes. But what about when he came to Hogwarts? When he stayed at the Burrow or Grimmauld Place? Those places didn’t have anything to do with Petunia. So why not make them available to him sooner? Hell, why didn’t Dumbledore take guardianship *himself*? Wasn’t You-Know-Who afraid of him?”

“I...” Severus started, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Oh, I do. He *wanted* Harry to suffer. He wanted him to learn things the hard way. And he wanted *you* to suffer, too.”

“No,” Severus said stiffly. “My situation was entirely different. He never compelled me into service. I knew what I was signing up for, Lily. I was well aware...”

“From what Nick told me, you were *devastated* that night. Sick with grief. What he heard... he said it sounded like your soul was being ripped from your body.”

“Melodramatic Gryffindor.” Severus rolled his eyes. “Yes, it was a bad night. What’s your point?”

“My point is that you were hardly in any condition to make long-term decisions.” Lily sighed, pouring herself a drink. “But Dumbledore didn’t care about that, did he? Did he try to comfort you? Did he tell you that it wasn’t your fault? No... if anything, I imagine he tried to make you feel worse.”

Severus shook his head abruptly. “Not possible.”

“That wouldn’t have stopped him from trying. Hell, isn’t that what he’s done ever since? Taken advantage of your guilt, your pain, your remorse? It’s never been a matter of choice, Severus. He’s *always* manipulated you.”

“Lily...”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” she said. “Tell me he *didn’t* hide the truth about Harry, that he *didn’t* let you serve him under false pretenses. You can’t, can you? Now tell me *why* he did that. Because he was trying to spare your feelings? I don’t think so.”

“I’m not stupid, Lily,” Severus cut in, his eyes flashing. “I knew I was being manipulated. I understood that right from the start, long before he...”

“Betrayed you.”

“Yes, he betrayed me. I’d spent nearly two decades assuming that my actions would save your son’s life. To be told otherwise? I most certainly felt betrayed. I felt used. But in the end, it doesn’t matter how long he waited to tell me. It doesn’t change the outcome.”

“You can’t...”

Lily trailed off, swallowing her words even as Severus downed the rest of his firewhiskey. She hadn’t planned this conversation. She’d wanted to defend her own actions, yes, but she’d never intended on putting *him* under scrutiny. Now that it was happening? She could hardly contain her fury. Yes, on some level, Severus understood that he’d been manipulated. But did he have any idea how deep Dumbledore’s deceptions went, how far he’d been willing to go for the greater good?

Should she explain what had *really* happened the other night? Should she tell him that Dumbledore had been aware of her survival all along? If nothing else, at least Severus would stop defending him. That was the one secret that could change everything, killing every shred of faith he had left in the man he’d served.

And yet...

Quietly, she studied his face, attempting to separate the conflicting emotions in his expression. His confusion was obvious, as was his resentment. But underneath that was something vulnerable, a belief he still clung to despite all evidence to the contrary.

He’d put his trust in Dumbledore, had even considered him a friend on some level. Could she really take that away from him? Or would it be kinder to leave it alone, to let him find comfort in his own perceptions? After all, he obviously still respected the former headmaster, even felt some lingering affection for him. What would it do to him to have those illusions destroyed?

Lily knew what *she* wanted. More than anything, she wanted Severus to tell Dumbledore to go to hell, to realize he was fully capable of handling things without the portrait’s machinations to guide him. But on the other hand, he was hardly someone who had a lot of friends. Why sever one of the only connections he had left, however flawed that connection might be?

“I suppose you’re right,” she said quietly. “If he truly believed that Harry had to die, I guess it wouldn’t have mattered when he told you. I just... it seems it would’ve been kinder

to let you know sooner.”

“It wasn’t about kindness,” Severus said, his voice hollow. “It was about trust.”

“Trust?”

“That’s why he waited so long to tell me. He was afraid I’d go back on my promise. But you already knew that, didn’t you? That’s the point you were trying to make, yes?”

Lily nodded.

“Well, save yourself the trouble. As I’ve said, I’m no fool.”

His expression was stoic, but the pain in his eyes was impossible to miss. Deep down, he *did* recognize the truth — Dumbledore had relied on his grief and remorse to keep him loyal, but would’ve never trusted him based on his own merits. Yes, and that was why Dumbledore had never even considered telling him that she was alive. Take his grief out of the equation? What was there to stop him from going back over to the other side?

It wasn’t just tragic. It was downright cruel. Knowing that Severus had been unfailingly loyal, had sacrificed so much... all for the sake of a man who’d never known him at all. A man who’d probably never *wanted* to know him, truth be told. After all, if Dumbledore had ever recognized Severus for who he truly was, that would’ve also meant acknowledging all the unnecessary pain he’d put him through.

“You would’ve *never* backed out,” she said, taking Severus’s hand. “Once you made that promise, nothing would’ve stopped you from following through. You didn’t need him to lie to you or manipulate your feelings. You didn’t need him to make any promises he couldn’t keep.”

“No,” Severus whispered. “I didn’t.”

“I’m sorry he never understood that.”

“As am I.”

Following that, they lapsed into silence, his arm sliding around her as she rested her head on his shoulder. She expected him to be melancholy after the conversation they’d had, but he seemed more relaxed somehow, as if her own assessment of his character had given him a great deal of comfort. And who knew? Maybe it had. If nothing else, at least he knew there was one person who recognized the goodness in him.

“Severus?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you angry with me?”

He hesitated, letting out a heavy sigh. “No. The fact that he found out about you was hardly your fault. As for your... conversation, I suppose I can’t blame you for that either. That said, I worry about the repercussions.”

“Repercussions?” she frowned. “Why would he tell anyone about me?”

“He wouldn’t. Besides, he’s a portrait, Lily. The portraits, the ghosts, the house elves — none have the ability to reveal sensitive information about this school without my permission.”

“That’s why you don’t mind me talking to Nick.”

He nodded. “Precisely. But Dumbledore is another story. Earlier today... well, he made it quite clear that he wishes for me to send you away. He’s afraid your presence here will affect the outcome of the war. As such, I wouldn’t put it past him to manipulate you to achieve that end.”

“I know,” she said. “He already tried.”

“Did he?” Severus gave her a sharp look. “What did he say?”

“That I’m putting you in danger.”

Severus snorted. “He’s hardly in any position to criticize you for that. What else?”

“He said...” Lily hesitated, realizing where the conversation was heading. “I think he was trying to make me feel guilty about Harry. Like I was choosing you over him, you know?”

“How?”

“Because I told him I wanted to stay here rather than go into hiding. Apparently, I’m also putting Harry at risk by being here.”

“Again, I don’t see where it’s his place to judge,” Severus said, looking resentful on her behalf. “Besides, you’re about as safe here as you’d be anywhere else. More so, I’d say, since you’re under my protection. As for the boy, there’s little you can do for him just now. You have no reason to feel guilty over things that are beyond your control.”

“Maybe.”

“I...” He paused, glancing down at her with a wary look in his eyes. “We still haven’t discussed what happened the other day. I know you said you forgave me, but I don’t believe you’re as unaffected as you appear to be. And I... I’m worried. I’m afraid of what the outcome will be.”

She shook her head, effectively cutting him off. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“No? Forgive me, but I find that hard to believe. You already sacrificed yourself for him once. I see no reason why you wouldn’t do so again.”

“Because it isn’t going to come to that.”

“Lily...” He trailed off, letting out a heavy sigh. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“So you’ve said.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, Severus,” she said. “It’s Dumbledore I don’t believe.”

And there was the underlying point, the culmination of all her animosity. She’d seen the truth for herself, knew that Dumbledore had always had other options that he’d refused to



take. So many opportunities to protect those around him, a thousand chances to lessen their suffering if he'd chosen to do so. Why, after everything he'd done, was it so hard to believe that Harry's death might not be inevitable after all? Was it truly the *only* option, or simply the one that Dumbledore had preferred? And why...

"I know," Severus said, interrupting her thoughts. "I suppose I can understand why you don't. Some of his choices might seem..."

"Cruel?"

"If that's the word you prefer. But he wouldn't have wanted the boy to die, Lily. If there had been another way, I assure you..."

"Maybe you're right," she said with a shrug. "But I still want to look for possible alternatives. I have to know for *certain* that this can't be avoided. Until I have that proof, I'm never going to believe it. I can't, Severus, no matter what..."

"Lily..."

"Will you help me?" she said, her eyes filling with tears.

"If that's what you want," he said, his voice strained. "If that's what you need, I'll do whatever I can. But I... don't want to give you false hope. I don't..."

"Not false hope," she said softly. "Just the chance to make my peace with it."

"All right," he said, taking her in his arms and pulling her close. "We'll start tomorrow."

"Thank you."

For a while, they just sat there, her head resting on his shoulder as he stroked her hair with gentle fingers. But gradually, the mood shifted, his hand dropping down to caress her back, her shoulder, fingertips grazing the side of her breast in a way that couldn't have been accidental. Realizing he was testing the waters, she gave a noticeable shiver, moving a little closer.

That was all the encouragement he needed. Brushing her hair aside, he planted kisses up the side of her neck and across her jaw, lips connecting with hers in a deep, hungry kiss.

"Lily?" he whispered against her mouth.

"Hmmm?"

"Let's go to bed."

Her only response was a moan, but he seemed to understand, staring down at her with smoldering eyes as he reached out a hand to help her up. Soon enough, they were in the bedroom, his fingers swiftly unbuttoning her nightgown as he backed her toward the bed. Tossing it aside, he knelt at her feet, drawing her underwear down over her legs before he leaned forward, pressing his mouth against her stomach, her hips and thighs...

"Oh god," she whispered, falling back on the mattress as he settled himself between her legs. And then she could no longer think straight, closing her eyes and arching her back as his tongue sent waves of pure pleasure shuddering through her. He kept it up until she was

panting for him, her toes curling against the sheets, hands moving restlessly through his hair. And then abruptly, he stopped, muttering under his breath as he unfastened his trousers.

“Please,” she whimpered, opening her eyes to meet his hooded stare. But before she could say anything else, she felt him probing between her thighs, a low groan rumbling against her ear as he buried himself inside her.

That was all it took to push her over the edge, soft gasps echoing off the walls as she quivered from head to toe. Murmuring in approval, he began to move, setting a slow, sensuous pace as he rested his forehead against hers. She didn’t expect him to speak — he rarely did when they were making love, other than a tendency to groan her name or the occasional curse when he lost control. But something was different this time, something intensely vulnerable that lay just beneath his growing pleasure.

“I...” He opened his mouth and then closed it again, panting slightly as he forced his hips to still. “I missed you.”

At first, she didn’t understand, her mind hazy with satisfaction. But then she realized they hadn’t done this since their worlds had been turned upside down. Before he’d found out about the passages, before she’d discovered the truth about Harry. Minerva, his awful night of torture and subsequent recovery, Dumbledore’s portrait... had all of that happened in less than a week? It seemed like forever since...

“Me too,” she murmured, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his neck.

No, it was something more than that. Almost as if...

Lily lost her train of thought as Severus began to move again, letting out an involuntary whimper as she lifted her legs to give him better access. So deep... deeper than he’d ever gone, the last of his restraint melting away as he thrust into her fast and hard, not bothering to stifle his shuddering groans. It happened without warning this time, her breath catching in her throat as her body trembled with indescribable bliss.

It was as if...

And then it hit her, in the very same moment that Severus growled her name, his hips jerking as he released himself inside her.

As if they’d never done this before.

It was an absurd thought, to say the least. And yet she couldn’t deny it either, holding him close as the furious pounding of his heart gradually slowed. They might have slept together countless times over the past few months, but *this*? This was something different. She’d never felt so close to him, so intimately connected, in a way she hadn’t even known was possible. It was as if all the barriers between them had melted away, replaced by a deeper understanding, a stronger sense of trust.

But more than that was an underlying certainty... a conviction that no matter what happened, the love between them was permanent.

Somehow, Lily knew she wasn’t the only one who felt this way. No, she understood that Severus would never question her feelings again, nor would he assume that she was on the verge of leaving him whenever they had a disagreement. What had prompted this change

between them? She couldn't say. All she knew was that she was deeply, intensely grateful for it, realizing that for perhaps the first time in his life, Severus knew for certain that he wasn't alone.

No, and if it was up to her, he'd never feel alone again.

Of course, there were still secrets between them. She needed to tell him about Minerva, for one thing. But she didn't have it in her to spoil such a perfect moment, probably the most blissful one they'd ever shared. He was holding her so tight it seemed as if he'd never let her go, still deep inside her as he rolled over onto his back. His eyes caught hers, holding her gaze as if by some silent command, a shift of his hips making her gasp as she felt him growing hard.

"Again?" she said, blinking in astonishment.

He nodded, his lips curving into a lazy smirk.

Tomorrow, she thought, her hips seeming to move of their own volition as his hands slid up to caress her breasts. Yes, she'd tell him tomorrow.

Tonight? She had better things to do.

## 66. Requirements

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### Chapter 66: Requirements

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Lily shivered, burying her arms in her cloak as she hurried through the passageway. It was well into December now, the castle as silent as a tomb under a thick blanket of snow. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for her companion, who kept up an endless stream of chatter as she followed close on her heels.

*Have you told him about Minerva?*

"No," Lily said, letting out a sigh. "I haven't had the chance."

Three weeks had passed since Severus's recovery... three weeks of waiting for an opportune moment that had never come. It didn't help that Lily saw him even less than usual these days, an unfortunate side effect of Voldemort's punishment. Inspired by his apparent vulnerability, the Carrows had grown bolder, their punishments harsher than ever. And of course, that only led to more rebellions, often keeping him on his feet from dawn until well after midnight.

By the time he made it back to their quarters, he was beyond exhausted, often falling into bed without even bothering to undress. And in the mornings, he was usually gone before Lily woke up, unless he decided to rouse her for a few minutes of intimacy before he left.

Those mornings had become precious, full of soft kisses and drowsy murmurs as he pulled her into his arms in the gray light just before dawn. Granted, it wasn't easy to watch him walk out the door afterwards, left to lie there in an empty bed when all she wanted was to curl up in his arms and go back to sleep. But it was something, at least, some small way to maintain their connection when they spent so much time apart.

Of course, the weekends weren't quite as hectic, but that hardly seemed like the time to tell him about Minerva either. Those few extra hours were sacred, the only chance he had to unwind. Lily wanted to do whatever she could to alleviate his stress, not make it worse. Weekends were for hot meals and warm baths, keeping the conversation pleasant as she rubbed the tension from his shoulders. The last thing she wanted to do was...

*We're here*, Charity announced, disrupting her thoughts.

"You first. Make sure it's clear."

Lily pressed the button, watching silently as the cat disappeared into the opening. Only a second later, she was back, tail waving jauntily, her expression smug.

*See? I told you. Perfectly safe.*

And that was something else that had changed over the past few weeks. Lily was far more careful now, hardly daring to go anywhere without extra precautions. After Severus's

punishment, she'd finally come to understand what was at stake. Of course, she'd always known he was in danger... but that was quite different than the reality of him collapsed on the floor, unconscious and bleeding.

Indeed, she might not have left their quarters at all if Severus hadn't had his own change of heart. After investigating the passages for himself, setting up additional wards and even brewing her some Invisibility Potion to use in a pinch, he'd been adamant. He wanted her to use them freely, insisting that there was no reason for her to stay cooped up all the time.

Naturally, he was right. Having *some* contact with the outside world was good for her, even if that contact was minimal. Just hearing voices from the other side of the wall did wonders to improve her mood, a welcome relief from her long days of isolation. But still, Lily had decided not to take any risks unless it was necessary to do so, never forgetting what the consequences could be.

*Well?* Charity prompted. *Come on then.*

Silently, she stepped into the room, wand clutched tightly in her hand. But the cat was right — the only person she spotted as her eyes swept the deserted classroom was the one she'd expected to see.

"Lily," Minerva said, moving forward to give her a quick embrace. "Come, sit down. Would you like some tea?"

Hesitating, Lily glanced at the door.

"Warded to the teeth, I assure you. Please, have a seat."

Sighing in relief, she dropped into the chair, waiting patiently as Minerva settled herself on the other side of the desk. The cat jumped up between them, knocking a stack of parchment to the floor as she sprawled out on her side.

"No manners. I swear, if she'd behaved this way when she was a teacher, even Dumbledore would've sacked her."

*Hey, I've seen Trelawney laid out across a few tables in my time. Hagrid, too, for that matter. Never got rid of them, did he?*

Minerva chuckled, giving the cat a scratch under the chin. "Good point."

Quietly, Lily listened to them banter, enjoying their obvious closeness. It was good for Charity to have a friend, someone else she could actually communicate with. She knew Charity didn't like to intrude on her and Severus too much, especially when she didn't have the option of knocking before she entered their quarters.

"I must say," Minerva commented after a moment. "I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

"You and me both." Lily said, sipping at her tea. She'd been counting down the days since the beginning of December, eager to spend more time with Severus. Among other things, he'd promised to retrieve some books from Spinner's End, tomes of Dark magic that she hoped would help her understand a little more about Horcruxes. She was still determined to find a way to save Harry, even if that meant turning to sources that frightened the hell out of her.

"Lily? What is it?"

She gave herself a shake, returning her attention to Minerva. "Nothing. Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Harry."

"Ah," Minerva said. "Still on the hunt then?"

"Yes."

This wasn't the first time she'd seen Minerva since she'd revealed herself. They'd met up a couple weeks before, safely tucked away in an unused guest chamber. That had been the day Lily had shared her plan to find a solution, ignoring Minerva's dubious expression as she'd shown her a stack of books she'd managed to swipe from the Restricted Section.

Of course, those books hadn't offered any solutions, but no matter. She hadn't expected the answers to come to her that easily. As long as she still had time to...

"My dear," Minerva said gently. "Are you certain this isn't... futile?"

"Futile?" Lily repeated, struggling to keep her temper under control. "I'm trying to find a way to save my son."

"If Albus was unable to find a solution, I don't see how..."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't."

For a second, Minerva looked deeply offended. But then she shrugged it off, pouring them both another cup of tea as she abruptly changed the subject. "Have you told Severus yet?"

"About you?"

"Yes."

"No, I haven't."

"Maybe that's for the best."

Lily frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Minerva said, lifting her cup to her lips. "You already said that he wouldn't be pleased. That he'd be afraid I'd blow his cover?"

"I wouldn't take it personally. He just..."

"He has no reason to trust me. Yes, I understand."

Lily shook her head. "That isn't your fault. Dumbledore..."

"It isn't a matter of whose fault it is. What would telling him accomplish?"

Lily sighed, setting her cup down. "I'd like to be honest with him. We've kept too many secrets in the past, and when those secrets finally came out... well, let's just say that it wasn't pleasant."

"Perhaps not, but not all secrets are bad, you know. Sometimes... well, sometimes keeping something to ourselves might be the kinder thing to do."

Lily sat silent, remembering the conversation she'd had with Severus a few weeks before. She'd nearly told him the truth about Dumbledore, that he'd known all along that she was alive. She'd wanted Severus to understand the depth of that treachery, to lose any faith he'd had left in the man he'd served. But that had been for her sake, not his. What would've been the point in making him suffer even more because of Dumbledore's actions?

"You think it would be kinder?" she said after a moment.

Minerva hesitated, then nodded. "I believe so. Severus is a hard man, Lily. No, don't interrupt. I'm not saying that to insult him — it's just a fact. He's not someone who trusts easily... certainly not after what's been happening these past few months. If you tell him that I know the truth, what good can possibly come of it?"

"Well, he..." Lily trailed off, realizing how foolish she'd been. She'd wanted Severus to know that not everyone hated him, to make him understand that he wasn't alone. Hell, that he might even have someone that could be considered a friend.

But would he believe it? Would he be able to let his guard down, even if she did everything in her power to convince him that Minerva could be trusted? No, he'd always be looking over his shoulder, expecting his secret to be exposed at any moment.

"He doesn't hate you," she said quietly. "I know he doesn't. But you're right — he'd brace himself for the worst. He wouldn't be able to help it."

"Exactly." Minerva nodded, looking satisfied. "Besides, it wouldn't change anything. We'd have to keep it to ourselves, to act as enemies whenever we encountered one another. Which is why I believe it's better to wait."

"Until?"

"Until I might be able to make a difference. Until making our peace doesn't involve him fearing for his life."

"You know," Lily said, giving her a thoughtful look. "You might be right. I don't want to keep this from him, but I don't want to put him through that either. He's got enough to worry about as it is."

"Like those bloody Carrows," Minerva said, her face twisting into a scowl. "Do you know what they did yesterday? Sent seven students to the Hospital Wing. *Seven!* Some nasty jinx that burns the skin — left blisters all over their poor little bodies! Honestly, I don't know how Poppy managed to heal..."

"She didn't."

"What? What do you mean?"

*Severus healed them.* The cat stood up and stretched, obviously deciding that this was an opportune moment to remind them of her presence.

"How?"

"Charity came and got him last night," Lily said. "He was in his lab for hours, then he... well, I don't exactly know. But..."

*He went down to the Hospital Wing, Charity interrupted. Hid in the shadows until Poppy slipped away for a few minutes. He found a way to give them a potion, I guess. I didn't actually see it — I was standing lookout. But they were all back in class this morning, weren't they?*

"They were," Minerva said, sounding a little shaken. "I couldn't wrap my head around it. Poppy might be a skilled healer, but Dark magic has never been her forte. But if Severus was the one who... yes, I suppose that makes sense."

They'd definitely made progress over the last few weeks. The snide remarks had stopped, as had Minerva's tendency to question Lily's love for Severus. But there were still moments like this, times when it was obvious that old prejudices still lingered. Minerva sat silent, amazement mingled with a touch of disbelief.

Yes, perhaps Severus wasn't ready to be reconciled with Minerva. But maybe Minerva wasn't quite ready to be reconciled with him either.

"I should go," Lily said abruptly, rising to her feet.

"Now?"

"Yes, I.. I have things I need to do."

"Very well, dear. We'll meet again soon?"

"Of course."

The truth was, Lily had absolutely nothing to do. The stack of books in the study had yielded nothing, nor was it safe to visit the Restricted Section in the middle of the day. She could've gone back to the Headmaster's quarters, but what was waiting for her there? Another long bath she didn't need, or napping away the afternoon whether she was tired or not? Or counting the hours until Severus returned, only for him to greet her with a weary kiss and trudge off to bed?

No, she couldn't do that today. She needed something to break up the monotony.

Indulging her restlessness, she wandered through the passages, hardly noticing what she was going. Only when she reached a dead end did she stop, gasping as a familiar figure materialized in front of her.

"Lily! Good afternoon!"

"Hello, Nick."

He grinned, executing a little bow. "And what are you up to this fine day?"

"I have no idea."

"Looking for something to keep you busy?"

She smiled. "Something like that."

"I'd say you came to the right place."

"What do you mean?"



“Well, there’s...” He spun on his heel, casting a pointed look at the wall.

“What?”

“You don’t know?”

Frowning, she looked past him, seeing nothing but dull gray stone. “No,” she said. “I just came down here because... well, I didn’t mean to, really. I was distracted.”

“By what?”

She shrugged. “Just thinking.”

“Yes, I suppose you have a lot on your mind these days. Would you like to talk about it? I’m a good listener.”

“It’s not that, Nick. I just don’t know how...”

“Try.”

“No point, really. Most of it’s about Harry, and I know you can’t talk about that.”

“Says who?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You said so yourself, remember?”

“Well, yes. But that was before you overheard Headmaster Snape talking to the portrait. I wouldn’t be revealing any secrets now, would I?”

“I guess not... well, unless there’s something else about Harry he hasn’t told me.”

“About Harry? No.”

“Good,” she said, sighing in relief. “Why didn’t you want me to find out anyway? Why did you try so hard to stop me?”

He shrugged, head wobbling on his shoulders. “Why go through all that pain before you had to? Knowing ahead of time doesn’t make it any easier, just prolongs the suffering. Trust me, I know.”

Was he referring to his beheading? Lily decided it was best not to pry. “I guess that’s true, if the outcome is inevitable. But if it isn’t, wouldn’t it be better to know sooner rather than later? So you can find a way to prevent...”

“Oh,” he said softly. “I see. No wonder you’re taking it so well.”

“If you’re about to tell me I’m in denial...” She trailed off, narrowing her eyes.

“No, not necessarily. But I don’t think it helps for you to know ahead of time either.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No,” he said, ghostly lips curving into a smile. “I suppose you don’t.”

“Are you saying it’s wrong for me to hope? Because that’s what everyone else seems to think.”

“No, Lily. It’s never wrong to hope.”

They both grew quiet then, hovering in the dank passageway like neither had anywhere better to go. And maybe they didn't, Lily thought, imagining how still and silent her quarters would be this time of day. Keeping company with Nick was strangely pleasant, even nicer than her brief interlude with Minerva and Charity had been. Why? She couldn't say, though maybe it had something to do with his lack of judgment. There was a wisdom about him that went beyond petty prejudices, a sense that he recognized people for who they truly were. Not just Severus, but her, too. She knew she could talk freely with him, admit things she'd never even consider saying to anyone else.

"I feel like I've failed him," she said quietly. "Like there's something more I could've done..."

"Harry?"

She nodded.

"You were ready to sacrifice your life for him," he said. "Isn't that enough?"

"No, Nick. Maybe if I'd truly died that night, but I didn't. I've been alive all this time, right there within his reach for years. And I... I've been useless to him."

"Useless?" Nick shook his head, wincing as he reached up to hold it steady. "I disagree. A person doesn't have to be aware of your presence to benefit from it, you know."

"Meaning?"

"Magic. We can't see it, we can't touch it, but it's there when we need it, yes? It gives us strength, courage, the power to fight."

"I suppose so."

"Well, the same is true for love. It's your love that has protected Harry all these years, your belief in him that has made him brave and strong. He might not know it, but you've been there with him every step of the way. Every time you've suffered because he did, or felt anger on his behalf, you've been right there beside him. He doesn't need to see you to feel your presence... deep down, he knows he isn't alone."

Lily opened her mouth to argue, but then she stopped herself. After all, she was hardly in any position to suggest that Nick was wrong, that she knew more about intangible connections than he did. Besides, she *wanted* to believe him... wanted it so badly that her eyes filled with tears.

"I hope you're right," she said, her voice choked.

"I am."

"I still wish I could see him though. Just one chance to see his face... I'd give anything for that. Anything in the world."

"Well," Nick said, flashing her a gentle smile. "I don't think you need to go *that* far."

"What do you mean?"

In response, he stared at a spot over her shoulder, waiting until she spun around to see what he was looking at. It was only the wall, as gray and drab as ever. But then her eyes

widened as she remembered what he'd said just a few minutes before. Something about coming to the right place... something to keep her busy...

"Nick," she whispered, moving forward to lay her hands on the wall. "What is this? Where does it go?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Is it something I'm not supposed to know?"

"No," he said, looking faintly amused.

"Then why can't you tell me?"

"Because..." He paused to take a deep breath, clearly for dramatic effect. "That's for you to decide."

Her eyes widened. "Does this lead to the Room of Requirement?"

"Why don't you give it a try?"

Lily turned on her heel, walking past the wall once and then again before making a final pass. She knew exactly what she wanted, didn't have to think twice as the words ran in an endless loop through her mind. At first, nothing happened, making her wonder if this was some trick on Nick's part, or if he'd been mistaken about the location, or...

But then there was a peculiar noise, the sound of stone scraping against stone, followed by a series of creaks. The wall parted like curtains, opening to reveal a plain wooden door.

Quietly, Lily pushed it open, gazing in wonder at her surroundings. She was in the Gryffindor common room, strangely empty yet intimately familiar. Plush chairs and comfy couches, a fire burning cheerily in the grate... it was just as she remembered it. And yet something was... different about this room. It took her a moment to realize what it was, her breath catching in her throat as she bent down to inspect one of the picture frames that crowded the tables.

It was a photo of Harry, no more than 11 years old, grinning at her with a brand new broomstick clutched in one fist. Leaning closer, she traced his features with the tip of her finger, brushing at his messy hair as if she could smooth it away from his forehead.

Moving to the next table, she found a picture of him flying through the air at Quidditch practice, his expression triumphant as his hand closed around the Snitch. There he was... laughing with his friends, his eyes bright with excitement as they gathered to open their Christmas presents. She saw him beaming up at Remus, talking with Sirius as he twirled his wand in lazy circles. She saw...

A life.

*Harry's* life, captured in dozens of pictures, each more joyful than the last. Some of these memories were familiar to her. Others she'd never had the privilege of seeing until now. But they all amounted to the same thing, something she'd never fully recognized until that moment. He'd been *happy*. Despite the loneliness, the fear, the ever present sense of loss, he'd truly been happy.

And in that moment, she could almost believe that Nick had been right. The sacrifice she'd made... yes, it had enabled his tiny heart to keep beating, but perhaps it had done more than that. Her love, her willingness to die for him... had her sacrifice protected him all these years, shielding not just his body, but his heart, too? The knowledge that someone had loved him so much, had considered his life more precious than her own...

Sinking onto the nearest couch, Lily grabbed the most recent picture she could find, one that had been taken at Slughorn's party the year before. Silently, she willed her love to reach him, hoping like hell he could feel it as she begged him to keep himself safe.

She stayed in the room for hours, only forcing herself to leave when the clock on the wall struck nine. Sighing, she rose to her feet, casting one last look over her shoulder before she headed out into the passageway.

"Thank you," she whispered, though whether she was speaking to the room or to Harry himself, she couldn't say. "I'll see you again soon."

## 67. Making Provisions

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### Chapter 67: Making Provisions

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Severus opened his eyes, gazing in bewilderment at the sunlit bedroom. But then he recognized the source of his confusion. It was the first time in weeks he hadn't risen when it was still dark outside, forced to trudge off to work before the sun had even touched the horizon.

Yawning, he shifted to his side, seeking Lily's comforting warmth. She was lying on her back, tangled hair spread out across the pillow, her lips parted. As he watched, they moved ever so slightly, curving upward like she was lost in some pleasant dream.

"Lily?"

In response, she murmured something indistinguishable, turning onto her stomach and burying her face in her arms.

Part of him desperately wanted to wake her, to coax her to awareness with gentle touches and a low whisper in her ear. He finally had the time to make love to her properly, after all, the luxury of prolonging the pleasure for them both. And in the aftermath? He'd be able to hold her for as long as he wished. No need to scurry off to work as soon as he was finished.

But in the end, he let her sleep. For the moment, it was enough to just lie there beside her, caressing her back with lazy fingers as he closed his eyes again, lulled by the sound of her soft, steady breathing.

To say it had been a difficult few weeks would've been an understatement. The Carrows had abandoned any pretense of moderation, always looking for new ways to test his limits. If he made a move to stop them? They took their complaints straight to Voldemort, insisting that he was far too tolerant. Fortunately, the Dark Lord didn't take their griping too seriously — he was far too distracted these days, sending out spies and building his allegiances for a battle he swore would happen at any moment.

All the same, it was a treacherous line to walk. If Severus was seen as too merciful, the consequences would be severe, especially if the student involved could be traced back to Potter. Unfortunately, those also happened to be the students who needed his protection the most.

The days of quiet dissension were gone. What had replaced them was open rebellion, brave yet foolish acts of defiance that landed at least a couple children in the Hospital Wing on a daily basis. Thankfully, no one had been killed, though with the way things were going...

Sighing, Severus moved closer to Lily, attempting to shift his thoughts to more pleasant topics. Like winter break, the potential for nearly three glorious weeks of relative peace. Of

course, a few students would be staying at Hogwarts, but most of those were Slytherins, making his job a hell of a lot easier. More than anything, he was glad that Draco wasn't going home this year. He'd be safe from the Dark Lord's clutches, free from the hellish existence his parents were forced to endure these days.

As for today...

Reluctantly, Severus pushed the blankets aside, pulling them up over Lily's sleeping body before heaving himself to his feet. A cup of coffee followed by a quick shower and he was out the door, feeling strangely nervous as he made his way down to the Apparition point. Why? He couldn't say... not until he realized that this was the first time he'd been out in months.

Of course, he attended meetings, but there was a world of difference between Apparating to Malfoy Manor in the dead of night and venturing out in public. He couldn't forget that he was seen as a traitor, a murderer, a treacherous bastard to be struck down on sight. If he hoped to make it back alive, he'd have to act with the utmost caution.

With that in mind, he reached into his pocket, withdrawing a tiny vial. Taking it down in a single swallow, he grimaced as the flavor of burnt toast spread over his tongue. His insides twisted, making him groan as he gazed down into a puddle of rainwater, watching his appearance change. His sharp features began to flesh out, dark eyes transforming into a dull grayish color as his hair lightened, growing shorter...

"Damn," he muttered as several buttons popped off to accommodate his expanding girth. He hadn't expected that to happen — the Muggle he planned to impersonate had been relatively slim. But he also hadn't taken into account how much weight he'd lost over the past few weeks, the result of forgetting to eat more often than not.

Ducking behind a thicket of trees, he transfigured his damaged clothing into something more suitable — blue denims, gray sweater, topped off with a knit cap to keep his head warm. It was the loss of hair that bothered him most, no lank black curtains to shield him from the world.

Nonetheless, he was satisfied, inspecting his reflection one last time before spinning in a slow circle.

The next thing he knew, he was standing in a deserted alley, just a few steps away from a busy thoroughfare. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he stepped out into the street, hesitating as he glanced in one direction and then the other. He needed a shop, yes, but there were dozens of them, one barely distinguishable from the next. Really, he should've done his research, should've had a specific destination in mind before he'd ever left Hogwarts. Unfortunately, there'd been no time for that. All he could do was locate the nearest phone booth, rifling through the telephone book for what seemed like ages before finding what he was looking for.

Two blocks away? He shook his head, tracing his steps back to a location he'd already passed twice. The sign said "Julia's", which was hardly helpful. But as he peered through the window, he let out a sigh of relief, pushing the door open and slipping inside.

"Good morning, sir! What can I help you with?"

He took off his cap, forcing himself to smile at the elderly woman who hurried forward to greet him. She had a sharp, hungry look about her — between that and the emptiness of the shop, he had a feeling that he was the only potential customer she'd seen that day.

"Hello. I'm looking for something for my..."

What was he supposed to say? Girlfriend? No, that was absurd. He was nearly forty years old, for fuck's sake. Besides, that was a word that teenagers used. His relationship with Lily couldn't possibly be compared to the antics of fickle adolescents, who changed partners as often as they changed clothes.

"Wife?"

"Someone... equally significant."

She nodded, her expression satisfied as she shuffled over to the counter. Withdrawing a couple trays, she laid them out for his inspection, practically humming with excitement as he cast a brief glance at the sparkling jewels.

"These won't do."

"No?"

"I'm afraid not. They're too..." He didn't want to say 'gaudy', but that was the only word that came to mind, garish yellow gold encrusted with equally vivid gemstones, reminding him of the ridiculous baubles Trelawney favored. "Too ornate. They wouldn't suit her at all."

"No?" the shop owner repeated, feigning a look of surprise. "Why, every woman wants to make the most of her beauty, to draw every eye in the room."

"She doesn't need jewelry for that."

"With all due respect, sir, I can assure you..."

"I'm looking for something a bit more understated. If I cannot find it here, I can always go elsewhere."

"Oh no, sir. No need for that. Step over here, please."

Ignoring her anxious expression, Severus followed her to the counter in the back of the room, leaning over to peer through the glass. At first, he saw nothing that appealed to him, ready to follow through on his threat to visit a different shop. But then something caught his eye, his breath hitching in his throat as he jabbed at it with his finger.

"That one," he said. "May I see it?"

Nodding, she withdrew the locket from its case, laying it across his open palm.

"Antique silver," she said as he inspected it more closely. "That piece is more than a century old."

Silently, he ran his fingers over the surface, admiring the intricate scrollwork. Vines and flowers — lilies, of all things. The petals sparkled with tiny diamonds, complemented by the specks of emeralds that made up the leaves. Slytherin colors? No... that shade of green was the exact color of Lily's eyes, so precise that his heart gave a lurch.

“I’ll take it.”

“Wonderful! Though perhaps...”

“Yes?”

The woman hesitated, obviously trying to hide her excitement. “That piece is part of a set. A bridal set, as it happens.”

Of course.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Severus said, “Show me.”

Before he knew it, he was standing out in the street again, his coat laden down with tiny boxes. Not just one, not even two. He’d purchased all six of the items, despite the knowledge that at least half of them would never be of any use. The engagement ring — slender vines of silver wrapping around a single blossom. The pair of wedding bands, far more simple, yet perfect somehow. He’d even bought the damn earrings, unable to remember if Lily’s ears were even pierced.

Well, no matter. He might have been a sentimental git, but at least the price was one he could easily afford.

Sensing that his disguise was beginning to fade, he slipped behind a deserted building, turning on his heel as he pictured his destination.

Spinner’s End looked exactly the same as he’d left it, with the exception of an extra layer of dust. And yet it felt alien somehow, like some relic from another world, a different life...

But it wasn’t the house that had changed. It was him.

Up until that moment, he hadn’t realized how much the last few months had transformed him. Restoring Lily’s humanity... her acceptance, her forgiveness, followed by the stunning revelation that she was in love with him. Spinner’s End belonged to those long, lonely years that had come before, a world of solitude and misery and grief. Indeed, he hardly recognized the person he’d been before she’d come back to him, before he’d ever known what it was like to look forward to a future with her.

Of course, that future was an illusion. He knew his days were numbered, that he wasn’t meant to survive this war. And yet he’d known that the last time he’d been here, hadn’t he?

Well, that, too, was different. Once, he’d accepted his death as inevitable, had even welcomed it in some small way. But that had been before she’d come back to him, restoring his faith, his hope, giving him the one thing he’d never thought he’d have.

Love.

Without question, that love had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. And yet it was cruel, because in the end, it was the only thing that had changed. Just like Spinner’s End, the war would go on as usual, a place he had no choice but to return to no matter how much he despised it.

Sighing heavily, Severus headed up the stairs, ducking into his bedroom where he knelt beside a battered old safe. Lifting the wards, he withdrew the items he was seeking, stuffing



them in a sack before making his way back to the kitchen. He made himself a pot of coffee, downing the first cup in several large gulps as he spread the papers across the table.

#### The Last Will and Testament of Severus Snape

He hadn't looked at this particular document in years, though he remembered the contents well enough. He'd written them down one night after drinking himself into a stupor, realizing that aside from a small trust for Draco, he couldn't think of a single person who should receive his considerable assets. He'd left most of them to Hogwarts, with the exception of a variety of research materials he'd bequeathed to St. Mungo's.

Shaking his head, he uttered a spell, pouring himself another cup of coffee as the parchment wiped itself clean. He reached for a quill, his hand moving steadily across the page before he lifted his head to view his handiwork.

The entirety of my worldly possessions shall go to Lily Evans Potter.

For several minutes, he just sat there, reading the words again and again until they'd burned themselves into his brain. It was the way it should've been, wasn't it? She was everything to him, after all, making all else seem trivial in comparison. And yet somehow, he knew it wasn't that simple.

Erasing the parchment again, he restored a few elements of the previous version. Books and potions equipment... the school could always use them, and Lily would have plenty of money to purchase more if she wished to do so. Draco? Despite everything, he had to admit that he still cared for the boy. Draco wouldn't need the money, of course, but knowing that someone had thought enough of him to make such a provision? Yes, he'd almost certainly need that by the end of it all.

And well... maybe it wouldn't hurt to set aside a few tokens for his colleagues. They despised him now, might never believe he'd been on their side all along. But just a little something to give them pause, to make them wonder if he'd really been as heartless as he'd appeared to be? There was a certain satisfaction in that.

Severus paused, quill hovering over the parchment. And then he began to write again, shifting uncomfortably in his seat as he did so.

Small trunk, Vault 796, Gringott's Bank  
Identifiable by the crude etching of a snake on the lid

This item shall go to Harry James Potter, who is free to dispose of it as he sees fit.

Junk. He was giving the boy junk. There was nothing in that trunk save for a few mementos he'd managed to collect when he was a child. A handful of interesting rocks, along with an old comic book he'd retrieved from a neighbor's trash bin. There was an ancient teddy bear, a pathetic looking thing with a wad of stuffing sticking out of its ear. Other than that, there were several odds and ends he couldn't quite remember, and of course, the most precious items of all — a dried flower given to him by Lily all those years ago, along with a single photograph of the two of them holding hands.

Sentimental nonsense, especially since Potter wasn't likely to live long enough to receive it. But Severus couldn't deny the urge to leave it to him. Somehow, on some level, he wanted

to show that he'd understood. That he, too, had grown up with nothing, had known what it was like to cling to the few treasures he'd been able to find.

Well, if nothing else, the trunk would go to Lily. Would she understand the gesture for what it was? An apology he might never be able to put into words, an acknowledgment of his willful blindness and misconceptions? Proof that he'd finally come to recognize the truth... that he and the boy had never been so different.

Above all things, he needed to prove that he hadn't been lying all those months ago. Given the chance, he would've done everything he could to make amends with the boy.

Tucking the documents back into the sack, Severus reached into his pockets, withdrawing the little boxes and setting them on the table. One by one, he pried them open, hardly realizing what he was doing until he'd slipped the engagement ring on his pinky. Had it really been so foolish to purchase the damned thing? One day, she'd find it, after all, would understand what his intentions had been, even if he'd never had the chance to follow through on them.

But deep down, he knew that wasn't why he'd bought it. No, it was that tiny, treacherous voice in the back of his mind... an insidious voice that never stopped insisting that there was still a chance that he might live. No matter what he did, he couldn't seem to silence it — it ignored logic, disregarded common sense, arguing that nothing was set in stone.

Hope. Exquisitely cruel, yet impossible to avoid.

With that thought in mind, he headed down to the basement, muttering to himself as he lifted the wards on the large cabinet that stood in the corner. Why was he doing this? He knew damn well that the boy had to die, even if Lily refused to accept it. Why was he helping her search for answers, knowing she'd never find them?

Hope.

He couldn't bring himself to destroy the hope in her, any more than he could kill it in himself. Why? Maybe because as cruel as it was, hope was also necessary for survival. She'd never be able to make her peace with the boy's death without knowing she'd searched for every possible alternative... just as Severus wouldn't allow himself to die without doing everything he could to stop it. Would it matter that his efforts were useless? Would he stop fighting even when he recognized that it was already too late?

No.

And if he couldn't do that, he could hardly expect it of her.

Fucking hope.

## 68. Christmas at Hogwarts

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### Chapter 68: Christmas at Hogwarts

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Lily sat at the window, sipping her tea as she gazed out at the falling snow. She'd spent most of the day alone, though for once, she couldn't bring herself to mind. On the contrary, she'd welcomed the solitude, so lost in thought that she hardly noticed as the sun melted into the horizon.

Where was Harry tonight? Was he safe? Warm? Celebrating Christmas Eve in some small way? Or was today just a day like any other, no thought for anything beyond his immediate survival?

Now more than ever, Lily longed to see her son. She would've given anything to spend the holiday with him, unable to imagine a more perfect gift for them both.

But of course, that was wishful thinking. All she had was the Room of Requirement, that warm, comforting place where she'd passed the afternoon. She'd spent the entire time gazing at a single photo, crying softly as she'd watched Harry wake up on Christmas morning, his eyes alight with wonder as he'd opened the first real gifts he'd ever received.

And then at last, she'd forced herself to leave the room, only to enter it again with a different intention in mind. It had transformed into a cavernous hall, packed from floor to ceiling with centuries worth of contraband. She'd never been inside the Room of Hidden Things, fascinated as she'd explored the vast array of objects. Finally, she'd settled upon several ancient books, along with a fine cloak crafted from the softest wool she'd ever touched.

Satisfied, she'd started to leave, only to notice a small object glinting beneath the light of her wand. She'd leaned down for a closer look, casting a flurry of charms to make sure it wasn't cursed. And then she'd smiled, plucking it from the ground.

*"Occulta pignus,"* she'd whispered, watching with bated breath as the metal began to glow.

It was... well, it was *perfect*.

She'd brought the gifts back to their quarters, wrapping them in shimmering paper before stashing them in an unused closet. After that, she'd decorated the tree she managed to Transfigure — artificial, yet every bit as fragrant as the real thing. She'd put up fairy lights, conjured garlands to drape across the bookshelves, had even...

"Stunning."

Lily gasped, whipping her head around to find Severus standing in the doorway. He was smiling, for once, his eyes warm as they swept over her from head to toe. Had it been silly to put forth so much effort? No, she decided, smoothing her hands over the fine velvet dress as she rose to greet him.

“You like?” she asked him, turning in a slow circle.

The dress was a deep shade of green, held up by a single button at the nape of her neck, leaving her back and shoulders exposed. She’d twisted her hair into a loose knot, adding a touch of makeup and some light perfume to complete the ensemble.

Drawing her into his arms, he said nothing, his hands sliding up to caress her bare back. But then he dipped his head, his lips brushing her ear as he whispered, “Very much.”

She shivered.

His arousal was obvious, a warm, solid weight pressing against her stomach as he kissed her, slow and deep. But then he pulled away, letting out a shuddering sigh as he put a little distance between them.

“Later,” he said. “For now, I have other plans.”

Only then did she notice the tray on the table, which held at least half a dozen platters along with a couple bottles of wine. Stepping closer, she lifted one of the covers, moaning in appreciation as the delicious fragrance of roasted turkey reached her nose.

When she glanced up at Severus again, he was smirking.

“Would you like to eat?”

“Please.”

“Then you might want to watch the noises.”

“Fine,” she said, letting out an exaggerated huff as she dropped into a chair.

He sat across from her, making quick work of dishing out the food before pouring them both a cup of wine. For a few minutes, they ate in comfortable silence, until finally, Lily set her fork down, groaning as she pressed a hand to her stomach.

“I can’t eat another bite.”

“Did you have something earlier?”

“Not since lunch.”

Severus frowned. “You haven’t eaten much. Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine.” Glancing down, she was surprised to see that her plate was still half full. “Just not that hungry, I guess.”

“I’ll put a Stasis Charm on it. Perhaps you’ll feel like finishing it later.”

Pushing his own plate aside, he leaned back in his chair, staring at her with a peculiar expression. Just as she was about to ask him what was wrong, he reached into his pocket, withdrawing three small boxes and setting them on the table.

“Oh, Severus...”

He shrugged. “I thought you might want to open one of them tonight.”

“Which?”

“Your choice.”

“Wait.”

Taking a last sip of wine, she rose from her chair and hurried from the room. A few seconds later, she was back, grinning triumphantly as she dumped her own packages beside the Christmas tree.

“Over here!”

Severus rolled his eyes, though he obeyed without protest, his movements almost eager as he joined her. Taking his hand, she pulled him down to sit on the floor, grabbing the biggest package and laying it in his lap.

“Open it!”

He shook his head. “You first.”

“Severus...”

Opening his mouth to speak, he let out a choking sound instead, his face twisting into a grimace. “*Fuck!*”

“What...” She looked down, cursing under her breath as she saw him gripping his forearm. “Now? It’s Christmas Eve!”

Severus didn’t respond, his face pale as he rose to his feet. She didn’t need him to tell her that the pain was worse than usual, that this was a different kind of summons. Fear gripped her by the throat, turning her blood to ice, her hand shaking as she clutched at his sleeve.

“Don’t go,” she said before she could stop herself. “Severus, please don’t go.”

“Don’t...” He was gritting his teeth now, fingers digging into the Mark so hard that blood welled up around his fingernails. “Don’t have a choice. If I don’t come back...”

“You will!”

“If I don’t come back,” he repeated, his expression intense. “Stay here... until the war is over if you can. You’re able to get food now, and... fuck.”

“Go,” she whispered, hating herself for saying it. But he was right — he didn’t have a choice. Even if he could withstand the pain, to disobey would no doubt cost him his life.

Knowing there was no time for a proper goodbye, Lily flung herself into his arms, pressing her mouth against his. And then just as quickly, she pulled away, not wanting to prolong his suffering.

“Lily, I...”

“I know,” she said, struggling to keep her emotions under control. “I love you, too. Now go.”

With one last look, he was out the door, black cloak billowing behind him. And then there was only heavy, oppressive silence, seeming to smother Lily as she flicked her wand, casting the room into darkness.

She curled up on the couch, burying her face in the cushion as her eyes spilled over with tears. For what seemed like hours, she cried, quiet sniffles giving way to gutwrenching sobs as she imagined the worst. She saw an image of Severus that still haunted her dreams, his body broken and bleeding on the hallway floor. Only this time, he was lying in a field somewhere, a vast expanse of white stained red with blood. Suffering... bleeding... dying... she couldn't reach him. Oh god, she couldn't...

And then suddenly, it wasn't Severus at all. No, it was Harry sprawled out across the ground, freezing to death beneath the heavy snowfall. His flesh was ripped open, gouge marks on his arms, his legs, his stomach. As if some wild animal...

*Mum? Mum, help me! Please.*

"Harry," she groaned, coming awake to find her own stomach roiling with nausea. She rushed to the bathroom, falling on her knees to heave into the toilet, awful sounds of retching mingled with uncontrollable sobs.

And then at last, it was over, leaving her drained and trembling, sighing in relief as she rested her head against cool ceramic. Finally, she pushed herself to her feet, staring in dismay at her reflection. Her hair had come loose, limp strands sticking to her sweat soaked skin. Her face was ghastly pale, as white as the driven snow, her eyes a hideous combination of red and green.

"Well," she said, reaching for a washcloth. "Happy Fucking Christmas."

By the time she'd cleaned herself up, she was exhausted, so tired that she could no longer picture the gruesome scenarios that had made her so ill. No, it was all she could do just to trudge back to the study, her eyes falling closed as she collapsed on the couch.

But when she awoke again, it was to something completely different. Gentle fingers brushing her cheek, followed by her name spoken in a soothing whisper, coaxing her back to consciousness. She opened her eyes and like some miracle, Severus was there, slipping his cloak off and tossing it aside as he knelt down beside her.

"Sorry to wake you."

"You're sorry?!" Lily sat up, relieved to discover that any trace of sickness had passed. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for her tears. Before she knew it, she was in his arms, sobbing against his neck.

"It's all right," he said, sounding alarmed. "I'm fine."

But she kept on crying, unable to help herself. Why? Months of putting on a brave face? Those awful nightmares? Realizing how easily those nightmares could become reality? She didn't know... all she could do was cling to him, venting her confusion, her fear and relief, until the episode had passed.

"Better?" he asked, drawing back to peer at her face.

She nodded. "Sorry. I just... I had this awful nightmare. You... Harry..."

"Say no more."

He moved to sit beside her, taking her hand as he used the other to withdraw his wand from his sleeve. With a tiny flick, he ignited the fairy lights, casting a soft golden glow over the room.

“Happy Christmas,” he said quietly.

“Happy?”

“Yes,” he repeated. “Happy. We’re both alive, aren’t we? Reasonably safe, at least for the time being. Yes, and so is your son. Right now, I can’t imagine asking for anything more than that.”

“You’re right,” she said, feeling a little ashamed. “Happy Christmas, Severus.”

More than anything, she wanted to ask him what had happened at the meeting. Why had Voldemort chosen to summon him at such a peculiar time? Why had he done so with such vehemence, to the point where Severus had feared for his life? Had he been hurt?

“Come on,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. “Let’s go to bed.”

As they walked to the bedroom, she knew the answer to that last question. He *had* been cursed a time or two — the stiffness in his movements made that abundantly clear. And yet he still seemed content, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close. She felt his fingers at the back of her neck, unbuttoning the velvet dress, pushing it down over her hips before he turned his attention to his own clothing.

But when they laid down, his kiss was soft and gentle, no urgency in the fingertips that caressed her bare back. He simply lay there with her in the darkness, his body pressed against hers, the slow, steady rhythm of his breathing matching her own as they drifted off to sleep.

Only the next morning did Lily realize that the mood had changed, his eyes smoldering as he stared down at the red lace panties he hadn’t seemed to notice the night before. But by then, her own mood had changed, too. She gave him a devilish look, launching herself out of bed and heading for the door.

“Lily…”

“If you want me,” she said, peeping back over her shoulder at him. “Come and get me.”

She heard a low groan, followed by the sound of bare feet padding across the floor. But by then, she was off, darting down the hallway and into the study, only stopping when she reached the Christmas tree, garlands shimmering beneath the morning sunlight. She saw his shadow approaching from behind, gasping in mock surprise as a long arm snaked around her waist. He pulled her flush against his body, dipping his head to whisper in her ear.

“You know,” he said, his voice still husky from sleep. “There’s a perfectly good bed back there.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But I want to open my presents.”

“Later.” His hand moved restlessly over her breasts, thumbs grazing her nipples.

“No,” she said, suppressing a moan. “Now.”

With that, she dropped to the floor, hearing him groan in frustration as she reached for one of the tiny packages.

“Lily...”

“You don’t have to stop.”

“No?”

“No.” She looked up, flashing him an impish grin. “In fact, I’d rather you didn’t.”

Slowly, she unwrapped her gift, pulling the paper off just as he knelt in front of her, sliding her underwear down over her legs. Both items were tossed aside, his dark eyes watching her intently as she opened the box.

“Oh, Severus...”

“Do you like it?”

“Of course I do.” She held the bracelet up to the light, admiring the subtle shimmer of the jeweled flowers, tracing the delicate vines with the tip of her finger. “It’s perfect.”

Without a word, he took it from her, his lips moving up the inside of her arm before he fastened it around her wrist. She kissed him then, slow and deep, burying her hands in his hair as she whispered against his mouth.

“Thank you.”

After a moment, he pulled away, leaving her bereft at the loss of contact as he slipped the next package into her lap.

She shook her head. “The rest can wait.”

“No,” he said, flashing her a lazy smirk. “I like this game.”

He moved to sit behind her, blazing a trail of kisses up the side of her neck as he watched her open her next gift. She gasped in delight, swiftly followed by a soft moan as he traced her ear with the tip of his tongue.

“Let me put them on you.”

“Thank you,” she repeated, tilting her head for easier access as he slipped the hooks through the tiny holes in her earlobes. “They’re lovely.”

“And now,” he said, his voice thick with arousal as his hand dipped between her legs. “The last one.”

This box was slightly bigger than the others, opening to reveal an object that made her breath catch in her throat. It was the most beautiful locket she’d ever seen, a perfect oval of antique silver. More ornate than the other pieces, the sparkling lilies were framed by emerald studded flowers, intricate vines melding seamlessly with the chain. She handed it to him, murmuring her thanks as he fastened it around her neck.

The pendant came to rest between her breasts, making him grunt in approval as he caressed them with one hand. The other had dropped to her lap again, long fingers plunging



in and out of her in a maddeningly slow rhythm. She leaned back against him, whimpering softly, grappling for her wand and bringing it to her midsection.

She hesitated, letting out a helpless moan as Severus increased the friction. But then she felt it — a familiar tingle deep in her belly as the charm took hold.

“Now, Severus,” she whispered. “Please.”

Without warning, she was on her hands and knees, gazing at a perfect reflection of herself in a mirrored ornament. Fascinated, she watched him rise up to kneel behind her, his hands sliding slowly down her back before he gripped her by the hips. She heard him take a shuddering breath, her own emerging as a sharp gasp as he buried himself inside her.

His eyes fluttered closed, his face slack with pleasure as he began to move. Meanwhile, Lily was mesmerized, aroused beyond belief by the sight of their lovemaking as she pushed her hips back to meet his thrusts.

“Severus,” she said, pausing to let out a throaty moan. “Look.”

Opening his eyes, he seemed bewildered at first. But then he followed the direction of her gaze, groaning low in his throat as he spotted their reflection. Her hair was a wild tangle, her skin shimmering with sweat, body bare except for the jewels that sparkled in the morning sunlight.

Clearly, he liked what he was seeing, his stare so intense it made her shiver as he moved faster, slamming into her again and again as her breasts swayed violently in response. That was the only part that made her feel self-conscious, her cheeks turning red as she attempted to hold them still.

“God, Lily,” he choked out. “Don’t...”

And then she no longer cared, her eyes squeezing shut as her body started to tremble.

“Severus...”

“Yes,” he panted, seeming to understand what she needed. His hand slid around to stroke her inner thigh, moving up to the spot where she was aching for him. He’d barely touched her before she cried out, shuddering from head to toe, only distantly hearing him gasp her name as he followed just behind.

When she came back to her senses, they were lying on the floor, his body draped over hers. It wasn’t the most comfortable position, to say the least. She was flat on her stomach, her face buried in the carpet. But then she felt his weight shift off her, strong arms pulling her up... he cradled her against his chest, his lips pressing against her forehead, her cheeks, then finally her mouth as he sighed in satisfaction.

“That was...”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Clearly, I should buy you jewelry more often.”

“Speaking of presents...” She lifted her head, glancing over at the tree. “I believe it’s your turn.”

The mood was completely different now, calm and quiet as he unwrapped his packages. He admired the cloak for a long moment, stroking the soft wool with the tips of his fingers.

"Where did you get it?"

"The Room of Requirement."

"You went out into the halls? Lily, you *swore*..."

"Of course not."

"Then how..."

"You know that passage by the front door? The dead end?"

He nodded.

"That's where it goes."

He exhaled sharply, his body relaxing. "You never mentioned it."

"I only found out about it last week. Nick told me."

"Well, I suppose this is a good thing. You'll have somewhere else to hide should it become necessary to do so. But you have to be careful, Lily. Some variations of that room are well known. If anyone were to find you there..."

"I know."

He hesitated, then said, "Thank you for the cloak. I like it very much."

Setting the next package in his lap, Lily watched quietly as he unwrapped the small collection of books. He didn't say anything, but she recognized the spark of interest in his eyes, the reverence in his touch as his fingers traced the ancient scrollwork.

"And now the last one."

Unwrapping the smallest gift, he withdrew the ring, holding it up to the light. It was a silver band, simple and unadorned.

"Is this...?" His expression was a strange combination of hope and confusion, making her curse herself for missing the obvious implications.

"It's a... promise. Look inside."

"I love you," he said, his voice trembling slightly as he read the simple etching. "Always."

For a moment, he just sat there, his expression stunned. And then at last, he slipped it on the ring finger of his right hand, leaning over to press his lips against hers.

"Thank you."

They passed the rest of the morning in quiet conversation, remembering Christmases they'd spent together as children as they finished the leftovers from their dinner the night before. After that, she coaxed him into the bath, soaping his body and washing his hair as he sighed in contentment.

"Severus?" she said, setting down the bar of soap.

“Hmmm?”

“What happened last night? When you were summoned, I mean.”

His eyes snapped open, his expression guarded. “Must we discuss it right now?” he said quietly. “This day has been... better than I could’ve imagined. I don’t want to ruin it.”

So something *had* happened... something bad enough to put a damper on the rest of the day. Of course, there was no avoiding that now. Even if he said nothing, she was bound to dwell on it, imagining the worst.

But *he* didn’t need to know that, did he?

“All right,” she said softly, remembering what he’d told her the night before. Harry was alive. He was safe. As long as that was true, the rest could wait. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” he agreed.

Despite her worries, Lily had to agree with him. She’d never had a better Christmas. They stayed in the bath for what seemed like hours, heading to the bedroom to make love again while their skin was still damp with fragrant water. Slow and gentle this time, their bodies still entwined as they fell asleep beneath warm rays of afternoon sunlight.

By the time Lily woke up again, it was after midnight. Severus was wide awake beside her, his body tense as he stared up at the ceiling.

“What is it?” she whispered. “Harry?”

“Yes.”

She sat up, pressing a hand to her mouth. Had he lied to her? Had he chosen not to tell her that Harry was injured — or worse — simply because he hadn’t wanted to spoil Christmas? No. Please, no.

“Lily...”

“Oh god. He isn’t...”

“The boy is fine.”

She slumped back against the headboard, sighing in relief. “Tell me what happened.”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“Don’t be an ass, Severus. Of course I do.”

“Very well. Mr. Potter...”

“Harry.”

“*Harry*,” he corrected himself. “Evidently, he thought it was a good idea to make an appearance in Godric’s Hollow last night. Little did he know that he was walking into a trap.”

“Oh, no...”

"He's fine," Severus repeated. "Somehow, he managed to escape, along with Miss Granger."

"But what about..."

"Ronald Weasley?"

She nodded. "I thought it was the three of them. But if he didn't escape..."

"Weasley wasn't there."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." Severus closed his eyes, resting his head against the wall. "Defected, perhaps?"

She frowned. "That's not fair."

"No? It wouldn't be the first time he'd abandoned the boy on a whim."

Lily let that pass, forced to concede the point. "How?" she said instead. "How did You-Know-Who try to trap him?"

Severus sighed. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask."

"Tell me."

He hesitated, then said, "He committed a murder. Stashed Nagini inside the body of someone that Harry had no reason not to trust. Indeed, I believe it was the person he'd gone there to see."

"Who?"

"Bathilda Bagshot."

"Bathilda's still alive? I mean, she *was*... oh, that's awful! I always thought she was a bit addled, but she was a sweet old lady. She certainly didn't deserve..."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too."

Lily laid back down, trying to imagine the scene that had happened the night before. How frightened Harry must've been... how unbelievably lucky to escape Voldemort's wrath. That was comforting, at least, reassuring to know that he was safely back in hiding. But it also brought home to her that it couldn't last forever. Sooner or later, this bloody Horcrux hunt was bound to lead Harry right to Voldemort's doorstep. And what then?

Granted, she was still confident that she could save him, refusing to even consider any other option. But she also had to admit that she had precious little time to find a solution. If she didn't act quickly...

"Severus?"

He grunted, clearly on the verge of falling asleep again.

"Did you bring those books back from Spinner's End?"

“Mmmm.”

“Where are they?”

“Study.”

“Thank you,” she said, leaning over to kiss his cheek. “I think I’ll go read for a while.”

## 69. The Power of Memories

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### Chapter 69: The Power of Memories

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Severus woke before dawn, yawning as he shifted onto his side. He nearly went back to sleep, but something felt off somehow, making him frown in confusion until he figured out what it was.

Silence.

There was no soft, rhythmic breathing beside him, no comforting warmth. He opened his eyes, dismayed to find himself alone.

Ridiculous, he thought as he heaved himself out of bed, reaching for his robes. But he couldn't deny his discomfort either, that faint unease whenever Lily wasn't where he expected her to be.

"Lily?" he called softly as he stepped out into the hall.

There was no response, his breath coming a little faster as he peered into the empty bathroom. But then he poked his head in the study, sighing in relief as he spotted her lying on the couch. She was fast asleep, her expression peaceful, an open book still resting in her lap. Picking up the cloak she'd given him the day before, he draped it over her, watching for a moment to make sure she didn't stir before heading over to the table.

Lily, he wrote. I'm off to get some work done. I'll be back this afternoon.

Yours, S

But when he reached his office, there wasn't much for him to do. Such a rare thing — he should've been grateful for the reprieve. Instead, he paced the room, longing for something to keep him occupied.

"Good morning, Severus."

"Dumbledore."

Be careful what you wish for, he thought, smirking as he turned to face the portrait.

"We need to talk."

"Of course we do," he said, though not with his usual sarcasm. "Just let me order up some coffee."

Indeed, he couldn't help feeling generous this morning. Dumbledore had let him off the hook on Christmas Eve, after all, asking for only the briefest report before allowing him to retire to his quarters. And after the blissful day he'd shared with Lily, he felt better than he had in weeks, his body relaxed as he settled himself behind his desk.

“Perhaps some breakfast, too?” the portrait suggested.

Severus rolled his eyes. “You sound like Lily.”

Nonetheless, he tapped his desk three times, indicating that he wished to receive a meal as well. Almost instantly, a steaming bowl of porridge appeared, along with a platter of toast and jam. Dumbledore allowed him to eat in peace, waiting quietly as he leaned back in his chair to sip at his coffee.

“Very well,” he said, setting the cup down. “What would you like to know?”

“Everything.”

He shrugged. “There isn’t much more to tell. The boy went to Godric’s Hollow, not knowing there was a trap laid for him. Thankfully, he managed to escape.”

“And you said this incident occurred at Bathilda’s house?”

“Yes.”

“That she’d been slain.”

Severus nodded.

“I’m deeply sorry to hear that, though I can’t say I’m surprised. I had a feeling Harry would seek her out when the time came.”

“Why? Did he think she was hiding one of the Horcruxes?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Something equally important.”

“Which would be?”

“Something that happens to be right here in this office.”

Severus frowned. “The sword?”

“Yes.”

“Which I imagine he needs to destroy said Horcruxes.”

“You’ve always been clever, Severus. Too clever for your own good, one might say.”

“Perhaps.” He paused, taking a sip of coffee. “Why did he believe it was in Godric’s Hollow?”

“Clues.”

“Clues? What kind of clues?”

Dumbledore shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. What matters now is making sure he receives the sword... a task which of course, must fall to you.”

“And how am I supposed to...”

“You’ll know when the time comes.”

That time came rather more quickly than Severus had expected. He'd just finished addressing a small stack of correspondence, pacing the room as he debated on what to do next. A sweep of the school? That was hardly necessary when the majority of students weren't even in residence. Should he return to his quarters? No... Lily was probably still asleep. Maybe down to his lab?

Yes, he liked the sound of that. He'd been longing for the chance to brew, something he rarely found the opportunity to do these days. Besides, the Hospital Wing definitely needed restocking. He'd provided enough potions to last the year, of course, but that was before the Carrows had come along. It was only December, and already, supplies were dangerously low. They hardly had enough to last another month, let alone until June.

"I think I'll..."

But then there was a loud shuffle, followed by the sound of someone panting with exertion. He glanced up, eyes narrowing as Phineas Nigellus Black came hurrying into his portrait.

"Headmaster! They're camping in the Forest of Dean! The Mudblood..."

"Do not use that word!" he snapped.

"The Granger girl then. She mentioned the place as she opened her bag and I heard her!"

The next thing Severus knew, Dumbledore was rattling on about need and valor, telling him any number of things he'd been well aware of for quite some time.

"If Voldemort should read Harry's mind and see you acting for him..."

"I know," he interrupted, approaching the portrait and jerking it open. Withdrawing the sword, he turned to retrieve his cloak, only to remember that he'd left it in his quarters with Lily.

Lily.

Severus knew what he should do. There was no time to lose — he had to reach the boy as quickly as possible. There was no telling when he might be forced to relocate again, and they certainly couldn't count on another opportunity like this. But he couldn't forget his promise either, the fact that he'd sworn to keep Lily informed of anything pertaining to her son.

Turning on his heel, he headed for the tapestry.

"Severus! You mustn't..."

The door closed behind him, his breath coming fast and hard as he hurried toward the study. Lily was awake now, sitting at the table with several books spread out in front of her, brow furrowed in concentration. She gasped, looking up at him with wide eyes as he approached.

"What..."

"He's in the Forest of Dean."

"Harry?" she whispered.



“Yes,” he said, holding out the sword. “I need to deliver this. It’s extremely important that he receives it.”

Lily stared at the weapon, her expression mesmerized as she reached out to trace the intricate scrollwork. “Why?” she said, sounding breathless. “Why does he need it?”

“It seems he’s ready to destroy a Horcrux.”

“Horcrux,” she repeated, finally giving him her full attention. “Severus... what about the diadem?”

“What about it?” he said, stepping away to retrieve his cloak. “We agreed...”

“To leave it alone,” she finished for him. “Yes. But this might be our only chance.”

“There’s always Fiendfyre.”

“You know I don’t know how...”

“I do.”

Shaking her head, she rose to her feet. “I don’t want you to do it for me. It wouldn’t be the same.”

He hesitated, studying her face as she held the sword up to the light. Her expression was wistful... no, desperate was a more accurate description, her eyes shimmering with tears. It wasn’t difficult to understand her feelings. She’d spent the last 16 years shut away from the world, unable to lift a finger to help her son. But it wasn’t only that. Her entire life had been shattered by Voldemort, her family torn apart. What had she ever been able to do to avenge them? To avenge herself?

Yes, Severus knew what he should tell her. He should insist that it was safer to leave the Horcrux alone, that it would be best if it remained intact until the last possible moment. Dumbledore had never confirmed it, of course, but he knew that was all part of the plan. That Horcrux was meant to lead the boy here to Hogwarts, where he’d be surrounded by friends and allies when the final confrontation took place.

On the other hand, there were arguments in Lily’s favor, too. Yes, the plan was for the battle to happen at Hogwarts, but that didn’t necessarily mean it would turn out that way. What if Voldemort captured the boy before he ever made it here? Would it really be so convenient to have an extra Horcrux lying around, one that would be far beyond his reach?

Besides, it wasn’t as if he’d know the difference. Unless he received word that the Horcrux had been destroyed, he’d still come looking for it. Yes, the original plan would remain intact, except for one minor detail. A detail that in the end, might save him precious time.

“All right,” Severus said quietly. “Let’s do it.”

Taking Lily’s hand, he led her out into the hall, halting as they reached the door to his office. Turning to one side, he pressed the silver button, igniting the tip of his wand as they ducked into the passageway. It was a short walk — no more than two or three minutes before they reached the dead end.

He turned to her then, gazing into her eyes as he whispered, “Show me.”

Nodding, she paced back and forth, coming to a standstill as a plain wooden door materialized in front of them. He hardly noticed the contents of the room this time, singularly focused as he headed straight for the statue. It wasn't hard to find — he could feel the Dark energy calling to him, the Mark on his arm prickling ever so slightly as he approached.

"Here."

She frowned. "Doesn't look like much."

"No," he said, studying the tarnished object. "It doesn't. Give me the sword, Lily."

"I'd like..."

"Yes, I know. And you will. But first..." He took the weapon from her hands, sliding the tip of the blade under the circle of metal. Carefully, he lowered it to the ground, murmuring a spell that made the jewel come loose from its socket. Beneath it was a single eye, as dark as his own. It swiveled in his direction, just as a soft, sinister voice whispered in his ear.

She doesn't love you. She never did.

Severus flinched, taking a step backward.

She abandoned you, Severus Snape. Rejected you in favor of your worst enemy. A man who tormented you. Despised you...

"Severus?" Lily said, though he could barely hear her now. It was as if he'd been transported 20 years into the past, all the fury, the pain, that awful feeling of betrayal slamming into him like a Stunner to the gut. Those feelings had disappeared from the moment he'd known she was in danger, love rising to triumph over resentment as he'd thrown himself at Dumbledore's feet. All these years, he'd never...

Poor, pathetic Severus. Did it ever occur to you that she clings to you now because you're the only option she has left?

"No," he whispered.

Who was it who understood your worth? Who recognized your talents? Her? No, Severus.

"She's given me..."

Nothing. Only guilt, misery, and pain. Cleave to her and you will die for that choice.

"I choose..."

Return to my side, Severus. Now, before it's too late. I will protect you. I'll give you power, glory, all the things that filthy Mudblood could never...

And just like that, Severus snapped out of his trance, gripping the hilt of the sword more tightly. So much treachery. So many lies. That despicable voice... not tempting him, but torturing him with reminders of his numerous failures. Voldemort had conquered him once, sensing his deepest vulnerabilities, leading him down a treacherous path that had nearly destroyed all that he held dear.

Yes, he'd done it once. He would never do so again.

"Take it, Lily," he said, his voice strained. "If you don't do it now, I will."

Her hands slid over his, though she wouldn't allow him to let go. No, she entwined their fingers instead, giving his a little squeeze as she lifted the sword high above their heads.

"Severus? Look at me."

As soon as his eyes met hers, they were perfectly synchronized, driving the sword down in one smooth, brutal motion. Metal crashed against metal, followed by a torrent of smoke and a horrific scream. Jarred from the force of the blow, Severus managed to hold himself upright, though the same couldn't be said for Lily. She stumbled backward, hitting the ground with a soft thud.

Before he could move to help her, she was up again, absently rubbing her backside.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Is it gone?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "It's gone."

Sighing in relief, she rested her head against his chest, gazing down at the twisted heap of metal. "Well," she said after a moment. "I guess it's off to the Forest of Dean then."

Fuck.

"Lily, you can't come with me."

"What?" She moved out of his arms, staring up at him with an expression of disbelief. "But I haven't seen him in months, Severus. Months. How can you say... he's my child! You have no right..."

"It is precisely because he is your child that I need you to stay behind."

"What?! You can't..."

"Whatever happens, I must not be seen. Not by him, not by anyone. Do you understand? My task is to deliver the sword. Nothing more."

"But..."

"This isn't a reunion, Lily. It can't be."

"If I could just see him... Severus, please."

"No," he said, nearly choking on the words as her eyes filled with tears. "Not this time."

With that, she sat down on a stack of books, her shoulders shaking as she buried her face in her hands. He hated himself for making her cry, would've done anything to make it stop. Unfortunately, what she needed was the one thing he couldn't give her. The slightest misstep could easily spell disaster, changing the outcome of the entire war. Yes, he knew how much she longed to see her son. So much that there was no predicting how she'd react if she did.

"A little more patience," he said, making an effort to sound gentle as he knelt in front of her. "That's all I ask. That, and for you to trust me. Do you trust me?"

She sniffled, peeking up at him through reddened eyes. "Yes."

“Then trust me when I say that this is the safest way. For me, for you, and most certainly for the boy. Believe me, I wouldn’t refuse you unless I felt it was truly necessary to do so.”

“All right,” she said, sounding subdued. “If it’s safer for Harry...”

“It is.”

“Well, I suppose you better go then.”

He nodded, rising to his feet as he helped her up. Quietly, they made their way back to the door, their hands still joined as they emerged into the passageway. But then she paused, glancing back at the empty wall.

“I think I’ll stay down here for a while.”

He started to question her, not wanting to abandon her in such a dismal place. But then he hesitated. There was something in her eyes, a strange, distant longing that made it clear she needed to be alone. Why here instead of their quarters? He couldn’t say, though he decided not to pry.

Pressing his lips to her forehead, he was both surprised and relieved when she tilted her head up, giving him access to her mouth. He kissed her properly then, grateful for the reassurance that everything was all right between them.

“I’ll be back soon.”

Focused on his mission now, he rushed back to his quarters to retrieve his cloak, ignoring Dumbledore’s questions as he strode across the office. He hurried through the castle and across the grounds, not stopping until he reached the Apparition point. A swirl of light and color, and then abruptly, everything stopped, a world gone utterly still.

He’d never experienced a silence so profound, his own footsteps echoing for miles as he stepped across the hard packed snow. Withdrawing his wand, he aimed a silencing charm at his feet, then moved like a ghost between the towering trees.

Need and valor indeed. The truth was, he didn’t know how to execute this part of the plan. Not until he spotted a lake in the distance, frozen solid beneath the heavy snowfall. He crept forward, glancing back over his shoulder several times, holding his breath as he finally made it to his destination. Pulling the sword from his cloak, he whispered another spell, plunging it deep into the icy water.

“Expecto Patronum!” he called in a harsh whisper, concealing himself in a thicket of trees.

What if the boy didn’t come? What if he’d already moved to a different location, or simply chose to err on the side of caution?

But as he considered the latter, Severus snorted, remembering who he was dealing with. When had Potter ever shown any restraint, especially in a situation where curiosity was involved? Indeed, he was like his mother in that way, particularly when...

Surprised by the thought, Severus was even more taken aback as a shadow separated itself from the trees. Bloody hell, he’d forgotten how much the boy looked like his father. But that wasn’t the jarring part. No, it was his own reaction... or lack thereof, to be more precise. Where was that rush of distaste, that intense, almost visceral dislike?

He tried to find something to criticize, simply out of habit if nothing else. But he couldn't do it. Lazy? Arrogant? No. All he could see was weariness, anxiety, and pain. The boy was far too thin, for one thing, a fact which clearly separated him from his father. Strange, but in that way, he bore more resemblance to Severus himself, clothing hanging off him like a scarecrow, dark circles etched under his eyes. James Potter had never looked like that, had never known what it was like to be left wanting. He'd never...

Shaking his head, Severus forced himself to focus. Harry was getting closer now, his eyes fixed on the doe. And then at last, he reached the edge of the lake, leaning over to peer into its shadowy depths. His eyes widened, a sharp gasp ringing out in the still morning air as he dropped to his knees.

"That's right," Severus murmured, so low he could hardly hear himself. "Take it."

"Accio sword."

"Oh no, it's not going to be that easy."

It took him a few more minutes to figure it out, but once he did, there was no hesitation. Again, Severus couldn't help but think of Lily, disconcerted by this new basis for comparison as the boy stripped to his underwear. By then, his teeth were chattering, his body shivering... well, it was no wonder he was so bloody cold. He was little more than skin and bones, so pale he was barely distinguishable from the snow.

Fingering his cloak, Severus was struck by a bizarre urge to take it off and hurl it at the boy's feet. But no, he couldn't do that. He could only watch unseen as the slight figure jumped into the icy water. For a moment, Harry just stood there, obviously working up the nerve to submerge himself completely. And then he plunged forward, dark head disappearing beneath the surface.

Four seconds... five... six... the pool wasn't that deep.

Severus took a step forward, instinct at war with common sense.

Seven... eight... nine... what the bloody hell was he doing?

No, he couldn't reveal himself. To do so could easily mean death for them both. Yet how could he stand by and do nothing? How could he return to Hogwarts only to tell Lily that he'd let her son drown?

But it wasn't just that. No, there was something else. What was it? He couldn't seem to focus, overwhelmed by a wave of panic as he moved a little closer.

Thirteen... fourteen... fifteen...

If Severus was going to act, he had to do it now. Even if Harry had managed to cast a Bubblehead Charm, which didn't seem likely, he'd freeze to death in a matter of minutes.

Bloody good job, he told himself, taking several swift steps toward the lake. Brilliant, truly.

But then he jerked back, sucking in a sharp breath as he spotted a figure streaking through the trees. He lifted his wand, only relaxing his grip as he recognized the flash of bright red

hair. Ronald fucking Weasley? Admittedly, Severus had to commend the boy for his impeccable timing, sighing in relief as he watched him drag Harry out of the water.

“Are you mental?!”

Truthfully, Severus had been wondering the same thing. But then he caught sight of the locket dangling from Weasley’s hand, realizing what must’ve happened. Fucking Horcrux. He should’ve known.

Quietly, he listened to their conversation, smirking as they puzzled over who might’ve sent the doe. Really, he would’ve loved to reveal himself in that moment, watching their mouths fall open in shock as he stepped out from behind the trees. But of course, he wasn’t prepared to sabotage the war effort for the sake of his own amusement.

“You didn’t see anyone else?”

“No, I...” Weasley trailed off, glancing at the spot where Severus had been standing a few minutes before. “I did think I saw something move over there, but I was running to the pool at the time, because you’d gone in and you hadn’t come up, so I wasn’t going to make a detour to — hey!”

Severus shrank deeper into the trees, casting a Disillusionment charm on himself for good measure. He held his breath as Harry moved closer, then closer still. They were only a few feet apart now, so close that Severus could’ve reached out and touched him.

“Anything there?” Weasley called.

“No.”

Now was the time to disappear. Severus knew that, and yet he stayed right where he was. Dropping into a crouch, he narrowed his eyes, watching closely as the boys moved to a flat rock on the other side of the clearing.

“Muffliato,” he breathed.

He’d cast the spell when he’d first arrived, but he couldn’t be too careful. No, especially when the ensuing argument had him muttering in frustration.

“Idiots. Just do it.”

“No! No, don’t open it! I’m serious!” Weasley was completely hysterical, eyes bugging out of his head even more than they usually did. “I can’t handle it! I’m not making excuses, Harry, for what I was like, but it affects me worse than it affected you and Hermione. It made me think stuff... stuff I was thinking anyway, but it made everything worse!”

And then suddenly, Severus understood what must have happened, recognizing both the necessity and potential folly in leaving the job to Weasley. It seemed that the locket had already caused a breach among the trio, which explained why Weasley hadn’t been present at Godric’s Hollow. He might’ve done the right thing in returning to his friends, but that Horcrux was a harbinger of things to come. If he couldn’t defeat it now, he’d be of no use as an ally.

On the contrary, he might easily get the others killed.

"I can't do it, Harry!"

"You can do it. You can! You've just got the sword. I know it's supposed to be you who uses it. Please. Just get rid of it, Ron."

Harry's plea seemed to stir something in Weasley. He moved closer to the Horcrux, gripping the sword tight.

"Tell me when."

"One... two... three."

There was a snarling hiss, followed by a soft click. For a moment, the boys just stood there, staring down at the open locket. And then the sword was rising, lifted high in the air by a pair of shaking arms.

"Do it," Severus whispered, wondering what the bloody hell Weasley was waiting for. But then he knew the answer, recalling his own hesitation, that treacherous voice...

He could hear it now, though the words were indistinguishable. Amplifying charm? No, he didn't need to know the particulars to realize what the Horcrux was doing. Taunting the boy with his deepest fears, coaxing him to betray everything he'd ever known. And it was working. Severus could see that, hardly hearing Harry's frantic shouts as he studied Weasley's expression. His skin was chalk white, his teeth bared, a flash of scarlet in his eyes. He lifted the sword even higher, only to stumble backward as a pair of illusions sprung up from the locket.

This part was new to Severus, which he supposed was a good thing. It meant his conviction had been stronger than the boy's, his willpower so firm that he'd been invulnerable to these tricks. He'd fought the battle and won, long before that fragment of Tom Riddle's soul could've attempted to raise the stakes.

Return to my side, Severus. Now, before it's too late...

He didn't know if the locket was speaking to him, or if it was only the memory of that voice that flitted across his mind. But it didn't matter — he was immune to it now. Shaking his head, he shoved it away, focusing on the struggle that was still taking place at the other side of the clearing.

Yes, he'd won his own battle. Weasley, as of yet, had not.

"Ron!" Harry yelled. "Stab it. Stab it!"

Severus couldn't hear the voice anymore, but the illusion was easy enough to see. It was a distorted vision of Potter and Granger, their bodies entwining in an intimate embrace. Revolting, not to mention brutal. Indeed, Severus couldn't help sympathizing with Weasley, watching his face turn green as phantom lips pressed together, soft sounds of pleasure echoing through the trees.

"Do it, boy," he murmured, fingers digging into the tree trunk beside him. "Do it now."

And just like that, there was a blur of motion, a deafening noise followed by a billow of smoke. One last, harrowing scream, and it was over, leaving the boys kneeling together in the snow.

“After you left,” Harry said quietly, “she cried for a week. Probably longer, only she didn’t want me to see. There were loads of nights when we never...”

Severus rose to his feet, withdrawing further into the trees. He only stayed for a few more minutes, just long enough to make sure they made it safely back to their campsite. He couldn’t see the location, both figures seeming to disappear into thin air. That was a relief, especially when his most powerful detection charms failed to root them out.

In a flash, he was back at Hogwarts, ignoring Hagrid’s mutinous glare as he strode across the grounds. He wanted to go straight to his quarters, knowing Lily had to be crawling the walls by now. But there was something he needed to do first, halting in an empty corridor as he gathered his most recent memories.

One by one, he modified them, his brow furrowed in concentration as he did so. It wasn’t anything drastic — he had no intention of lying to her or pretending the scene had gone differently than it had. But he could at least ease her anxieties somewhat, which seemed like the most merciful thing to do. After all, there was nothing she could do to help the boy just now.

Carefully, he adjusted Harry’s appearance, putting a little more flesh on his bones and color in his cheeks. He made his clothing a bit less ragged, got rid of the dark circles under his eyes. Yes, that was better... though there wasn’t much he could do about the look in those eyes, wariness underscored by a touch of fear. Hopefully, she wouldn’t notice, distracted by Harry’s obvious relief upon realizing that his friend had returned to his side.

Severus did his best to highlight the good parts, diminishing the possibility that the boy could’ve drowned, minimizing the time it had taken for the Horcrux to be destroyed. Instead, he lingered on an image of the boys sitting on the ground with the broken locket lying beside them, their heads bent in quiet conversation.

But still, it wasn’t enough. There was one more thing he wanted to do, grasping at a final wisp of memory. He stretched those few seconds out, transforming them into several minutes.

Satisfied, he hurried toward his office, flinging the door open and striding over to the tapestry.

“Severus! What...”

“Mission accomplished.”

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As soon as Lily heard the door open, she rushed out into the hall, bombarding Severus with questions.

“Did you find him? Did you give him the sword? How did he look? Is he...”

“Patience, woman. At least let me sit down.”

Mumbling an apology, she took him by the hand, practically dragging him into the study. She removed his cloak, tossing it over the hook in one corner as he settled himself on the couch.



“Coffee?” she said, her hands trembling as she fussed with the serving tray. “Tea?”

“Coffee. Black, with...”

“Two sugars. Yes, I know.”

Glad she’d had the presence of mind to have it ready for him, she poured out a cup, placing it in his hands as she dropped onto the couch beside him. He took a long sip before leaning his head back, his eyes drifting closed.

“I could really use a nap right now,” he said casually. “It’s been a long morning.”

“Severus...”

He cracked one eye open, his lips curving into a devilish smirk. Well, that was encouraging. He’d hardly be in the mood for playing games if things had gone badly, right? Still, she couldn’t stop a whimper from rising in her throat, unable to hide her desperation.

“Please?”

Just like that, any trace of humor disappeared. “Very well,” he said, his voice quiet. “Bring me the Pensieve.”

Soon enough, she was staring down into the basin, hardly able to believe her good fortune. Of course, it only held a single memory, barely covering the bottom. But she gazed at it like some priceless treasure, her eyes filling with tears as she glanced up at Severus.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

And then she plunged forward, gasping at the sensation of falling headlong into a bank of soft, powdery snow. The next thing she knew, she was walking beside Severus, feeling his uncertainty as he stared out over the trees, each indistinguishable from the next. But she saw it just as he did — a small lake in the distance. When they reached it, he cracked the ice, thrusting the sword into its shadowy depths.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Of course, she knew they shared a Patronus, though she’d never been so grateful for that fact. It was like she’d been there after all, the embodiment of her spirit reaching out to her child.

Breathlessly, she watched it disappear, turning to Severus to study his face. His eyes were intense, his brow furrowed, a restless energy in his movements as he retreated behind a cluster of trees. Clearly, he’d chosen to include his emotions in the memory. She could feel his anxiety, the quiet fear that Harry wouldn’t respond to his summons. But then his body grew tense, his expression sharp and focused.

“Oh,” she whispered, spotting the flash of light as it reappeared in the distance. Trailing in its wake was a figure she instantly recognized, a shock of messy black hair becoming visible as he approached.

“Oh, Harry,” she said out loud, tears springing to her eyes. He’d hardly changed since the last time she’d seen him. Still slender, of course, but he looked reasonably well fed, his cheeks reddened by the frigid morning air.

And Severus? She'd nearly forgotten him... at least until she began to sense his reaction. She felt no resentment from him, no hostility... just his bewilderment at the absence of those emotions, underscored by something she immediately recognized as concern. She stared up at him in surprise, though she didn't have time to dwell on it. Not when she realized what Harry was about to do.

Of course, she knew how the Sword of Gryffindor worked, that it could only be given under conditions of need and valor. It wasn't as if Severus could've just left it lying there in the snow. Rationally, she also knew that nothing bad had happened to Harry that morning. Severus would've never shown her this memory if it had.

But that didn't stop her from rushing forward, dropping to her knees beside the water as Harry plunged beneath the surface. For a split second, any sense of logic was obliterated by terror, her breath coming in short, panicked bursts. But then there was a blur of motion, a flash of copper in the morning sunlight as another shadow dove into the water. And then Harry was up again, coughing and sputtering as the boys collapsed beside her.

"Are you mental?!"

Ron Weasley? Lily smiled, glad to see that Harry's friend hadn't deserted him after all.

"You didn't see anyone else?" Harry said a few minutes later. And then she was following him into the trees, dangerously close to the spot where Severus was waiting. Oh god... had he seen...

No. Severus was still visible to her, probably because it was his memory she was experiencing. But there was a slight shimmer to his skin, making it clear that he'd cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. She waited there beside him, both disappointed and relieved when Harry shrugged, heading back over to Ron.

Should she follow? No... she could see what they were about to do, sensing there was something private about this moment. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but it was obvious they were arguing over who should destroy the Horcrux. Finally, Ron nodded in agreement, lifting the sword over his head.

"Stab it!" Harry yelled.

Lily cringed at the sound of metal striking stone, the terrible scream that rang out through the trees. But the sense of relief that followed was overwhelming, Harry's mouth curving into the first genuine smile she'd seen from him in more than a year. Sitting down beside Ron, he patted him on the back, followed by the murmur of quiet conversation.

And then at last, Harry rose to his feet, moving away to retrieve his clothes. "Let's get back to the campsite."

The scene seemed to stop there, a moment frozen in time. What...

And then suddenly, she understood. This was her chance.

Holding her breath, she darted out from behind the trees, eager to reach her son's side. He was crouched on the ground, jumper clutched in one hand, hesitating like he was waiting for someone to join him. And he was, though of course, he couldn't have known it. Lily dropped down in front of him, peering into his eyes as a single tear fell from her own.

“Harry,” she said, her voice catching on a sob. “Harry, I’m here. I love you, Harry, I... I’m not going to let this happen. I swear to you. Just hold out a little longer, all right? I’ll find a way.”

Unfortunately, she couldn’t touch him, couldn’t hope to see so much as a flicker of recognition in his eyes. Nonetheless, she felt a deep sense of comfort. She was mere inches away from her son, able to see for herself that he was safe and alive. Yes, and she could unburden her heart to him, even if he wasn’t able to hear her quite yet.

Only then did she understand why Severus had refused to take her with him. Yes, the risk involved had been reason enough, but it was more than that. Somehow, he must’ve known that it would’ve been agony for her to wait back there in the trees, unable to move or speak or even take a closer look to make sure Harry was all right. He’d brought her the memory instead, a place where she was free to react as she pleased without endangering her child.

As good as the real thing? Perhaps not. But for now, it was close enough.

## 70. Unexpected Expectations

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### Chapter 70: Unexpected Expectations

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Lily hesitated, stifling a yawn as she slipped into the dimly lit pantry. It was far too early to be awake, especially on a Saturday. But today was a special occasion, one they might not have the luxury of celebrating later in the day. No, not when Severus could be called away at a moment's notice, which happened frequently now that school was back in session.

Silently, she crept forward, keeping an ear out for house elves as she enlarged the miniature basket she'd brought. She filled it with the most appetizing food she could find — sausages and fresh fruit, half a dozen muffins, a few eggs and a bit of butter, along with a large pitcher of pumpkin juice.

Soon enough, she was back in their quarters, relieved to discover that Severus was still sleeping. She carried the food to the study, setting it down on the table before conjuring a fine silver tray. Breakfast in bed... she couldn't think of anything better for him to wake up to on his birthday. Well, maybe *one* thing, but she'd take care of that after he'd eaten.

Setting the fruit in a bowl, Lily warmed the muffins before turning her attention to the eggs and sausages. Cooking was always a bit tricky in here, without the convenience of a proper kitchen. But she'd learned to manage well enough, dumping the links into a frying pan she'd transfigured.

*"Calor tardius."*

Slowly, the meat began to warm, the heady fragrance of frying pork filling the air. And then suddenly, the odor turned rancid, a sharp, pungent smell that made her stomach lurch.

"Oh no," she moaned, sending the pan toppling to the floor as she raced to the bathroom. Dropping to her knees, she retched into the toilet for what seemed like hours, too miserable to stifle the noises she was making.

"Lily?"

"Sev..." Her stomach roiled, unable to tolerate the faint odor of sausages that wafted in through the open door. "Cl-close it."

She lurched forward again, gagging and heaving, too sick to be embarrassed as the door closed with a soft click. At first, she thought he'd left her alone. But then she felt his cool fingers brushing her neck, sighing in relief as he pulled her hair out of her face.

"I..." she whispered a few minutes later, pausing to release a shuddering breath. "I think I'm done."

There was a flushing sound, followed by a cold washcloth pressed against her forehead. She felt weak, drained, hardly even aware of what she was doing as she slumped forward to

rest her head on his chest. But then gradually, her trembling subsided, replaced by self-consciousness as she opened her eyes to gaze up at him.

“Sorry.”

He jerked his head, dismissing her apology, though his expression was grim. “How long?”

“What?” She frowned.

“How long have you been pregnant?”

She stared at him, stunned. “I’m not... we’ve been using...”

But then she trailed off, her eyes widening as she remembered the fertility potion she’d taken in November. It had been easy to forget in the midst of all the turmoil, those awful feelings of betrayal followed by the fear that Severus would never return. And when he had, all that had mattered was healing. Healing his broken body, yes, but also healing the breach between them.

She’d needed to make him understand that she wasn’t going anywhere. And Severus? Perhaps he’d needed to prove the same. Whatever the reason, there’d been an urgent need to be as close as possible. That need had turned into desperation, leading them to make love once, twice, and then a third time on the first night he’d finally been well enough to do so.

Three times, and it hadn’t even occurred to her to cast the Contraceptive Charm. They’d used it ever since, of course, but if she’d already conceived...

Why hadn’t she noticed? Her time of the month should’ve happened *weeks* ago. And what about Christmas Eve? She’d gotten sick then, too. Why had it been so easy to blame that on her nightmares, never imagining that there might’ve been another reason? Hell, she’d spent months actively *trying* to get pregnant. Why hadn’t she recognized the signs?

But deep down, she knew why she hadn’t seen it. She wasn’t *supposed* to think about having a baby. No, not since they’d agreed that it would be better to wait. She’d taken that to heart, never forgetting the necessary precautions.

Except that one night.

“Lily?” Severus prompted, his voice low.

“About six weeks.”

“Fuck.”

“I didn’t know, Severus. I swear, I didn’t.”

“How?”

“How did it happen?” she asked him, swallowing past the lump in her throat. “Or how did I miss it?”

“Both.”

Briefly, she explained, watching a dozen emotions flit across his face. He settled on an expression that was all too familiar, his usual look whenever he believed he’d wronged her somehow. Guilt, shame, underscored by a touch of fear.

"I'm an idiot," he said quietly.

"We *both* forgot. Does that make me an idiot, too?"

"No. *However...*"

"Besides, it's hardly surprising. It's not like we were in the habit of making sure this *didn't* happen, you know?"

He grunted, his eyes fixed on her stomach as if he expected it to swell right before his eyes.

"Anyway, I'm the one who made the damn Fertility Potion. I'm sure that didn't help."

"Because of me."

"No, Severus. Because of *me*. Because I was tired of waiting for it to happen on its own. You can't blame yourself for that."

"I was the one who put the idea in your head. I *insisted...*"

He trailed off as she began to laugh, a bizarre combination of tension relief and genuine amusement. It was a bit painful — the muscles of her abdomen were still sore from retching. But when she opened her eyes, catching sight of his bewildered expression, she couldn't help herself. She giggled helplessly, struggling to bring herself under control.

"I'm glad you find this situation... entertaining."

"No, it's not that. It's just..." Chuckling, she pressed a hand against her stomach. "Ow."

"Is something wrong?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

Casting her a dubious look, he sighed, resting his head against the wall. "I'm sorry."

"No, Severus. Believe me, you didn't put any ideas in my head that weren't already there."

"Perhaps. But we wouldn't have been trying in the first place if I hadn't..."

"No," she interrupted. "Do you know what we would've been doing instead? What I would've been doing?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I would've been trying to convince myself that this could never happen. That being with you meant sacrificing any possibility of having another child."

"I would've done it for you," he said quietly.

"Yes, I know. But as I told you, that wouldn't have been enough. It had to be something we wanted."

"I showed you..."

"Showed me how you really felt. Yes. But how did that happen? Why did your feelings change?"

He stared at her for a long moment, dawning realization in his eyes. "Because of that harebrained scheme of mine. As absurd as it was, I suppose it did give me time to get used to the idea."

"Right. So why apologize? That might have never happened if..."

"Harebrained," he repeated, his expression grim. "Trying to get you pregnant in the middle of a war? What the bloody hell was I thinking? And now you are, and... fuck." He groaned, burying his head in his hands.

Lily swallowed hard, blinking back the moisture in her eyes. The news was a shock, yes. She'd hardly had a chance to come to terms with it herself. But what she needed from Severus was... well, she didn't know what she needed. She only knew that it wasn't this.

"You know," she said after a moment. "We don't know for certain."

And that was true, really. Two bouts of sickness? Those nightmares had been gruesome, and there'd certainly been something off about that sausage. Missing her time of the month? It wasn't as if she'd never been late before. Besides...

"Do you want to cast the charm?"

"Wait," she whispered.

"For what?"

"I just... give me a minute to think."

Suddenly, it was all too real. She was minutes, perhaps even seconds, away from knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt whether there was a child growing inside her, if she'd be giving birth in nine months, if her entire future was about to change. She needed a moment to adjust to the idea.

And what if she *wasn't* pregnant?

Logically, that would be for the best. Between their current circumstances and Severus's obvious lack of enthusiasm for the idea, she couldn't deny that. But she couldn't ignore what was in her heart either, a longing that was as powerful as it was instinctive, defying all common sense.

Yes, she wanted to be pregnant. Wanted it desperately, if she were honest with herself. Deep down, that had never changed, no matter how much she'd struggled to put the idea from her mind. But if Severus *didn't* want it, if he insisted on treating it like a mistake...

Well, she'd be heartbroken, to say the least. So heartbroken that she *almost* wanted to put it off a little longer, knowing that either result was bound to cause her pain.

Almost. But not quite.

"All right," she said, letting out a heavy sigh. "Do it."

"You don't want to do it yourself?"

"No, Severus. It needs to be you."

He withdrew his wand and then hesitated, his mouth twisting into a grimace. "Lily..."

Suddenly, there was a piercing sound from the other side of the wall, one that had become all too familiar over the past few months. It demanded the headmaster's presence immediately, warning of some impending threat, some urgent situation that couldn't be ignored. That sound was usually followed by a rush of fear, though at the moment, Lily was too distracted to pay it much heed. Probably just a false alarm, which was the case more often than not.

Could the same be said for her own situation?

Meanwhile, Severus was rising to his feet. "This," he said, waving in the general direction of her stomach, "will have to wait."

"Don't you want to know?"

"No time to discuss it."

"I wasn't suggesting..." By the time she made it to the bedroom, he was fully dressed, right down to his boots. He brushed past her, his strides so long and quick that he'd reached the front door before she called out, "*Wait!*"

He paused, seeming to deliberate before he turned to face her.

"I'm sorry," he said, clearly making an effort to soften his tone. "I have to go."

"Yes, I know that. But it only takes a second to cast the charm."

"Whether you're pregnant or not," he said. "There isn't a damn thing I can do about it right now."

"No," she agreed, even as she struggled not to cry. "But at least you'll know. Isn't that better than being left to wonder for... however long you might be gone?"

He hesitated.

"Besides, if I am, it'll give us both time to get used to the idea."

"Yes, I suppose so. Very well then." Taking his wand from his sleeve, he pointed it at her stomach. He paused, taking a deep breath, then murmured, "*Deprehendere graviditate.*"

There was a tingling sensation, followed by a flash of light. And there it was — indisputable proof that she was pregnant.

"Shit," she whispered.

Severus opened his mouth and then closed it again, his throat working convulsively. But the shrieking was growing louder now, leaving him no more time to gather his thoughts. He gave her one last look, strange and desperate... like he couldn't wait to get away from her? Or couldn't bear the thought of leaving her side?

Maybe a little of both.

"We—" he said, his voice strained. "We'll discuss this later."

And then he was gone.



Severus stalked through the halls like some menacing beast, snarling at anyone who was unfortunate enough to cross his path. Students? Teachers? It didn't matter. With one word, one look, he sent them fleeing, muttering under his breath as he swept into the Muggle Studies classroom.

*This* was the big emergency? He stopped and stared, furious that he'd been called away from a true crisis in order to deal with what appeared to be a minor prank.

Green slime dripped from the ceiling, desks and floor hidden beneath several inches of goo. Alecko was covered in it from head to toe, shrieking hysterically as she gestured at him with her stubby little arms.

"Bloody hell, Snape! Do you see what those little monsters..."

"Headmaster," he snapped, giving her a cold, contemptuous glare. "I trust you'll remember that the next time you choose to address me. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to be put on probation?"

"You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, wouldn't I?" Cutting a path through the slime, he strode across the room, not stopping until he was looming over her. "I don't like threats, Alecko. Just as *you* wouldn't like it if I were forced to report this incident to the Dark Lord."

"Go ahead," she crowed, though her face had gone pale. "Tell him!"

"Tell him that you lack the ability to keep even a handful of students under control? Or that clearly, you're unable to cast a simple evaporation charm? That's why you raised the alarm, was it not?"

She scowled at him, withdrawing her wand and pointing it at the slime. "*Evanesco*," she said, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Severus made a tutting sound. "Oh no," he said. "I'm afraid that isn't going to work. But you knew that, didn't you?"

"Fine! Just get rid of the bloody mess!"

"I do not like threats," he repeated, his voice low. "Nor do I appreciate commands. At least, not from anyone who lacks the authority to give them. Now try again."

"Headmaster," she said from between gritted teeth. "Will you help me clean this up?"

"Perhaps. Then again..."

The timing couldn't have been more perfect. He'd caught a shadow out of the corner of his eye, glancing over to see a familiar figure standing just outside the door. Minerva was having trouble hiding her amusement — her lips were twitching, gray eyes dancing with mirth.

"Professor," Severus said smoothly. "It seems your colleague lacks the knowledge to deal with this little... problem. Care to provide a demonstration?"

"Of course, Headmaster. It would be my pleasure."

Minerva pulled out her wand, her expression positively gleeful as she pointed it at the mess. “*Evaporo!*” she cried, her voice resonating with strength as it echoed off the walls. And just like that, the slime began to dissipate, gone in a matter of seconds without a trace left behind.

Alecto glared at them both, looking as if she’d just eaten something rancid. And then she turned on her heel, storming out of the room.

“Thank you,” Severus said, his voice quiet.

“Certainly.”

“Ah... you may return to your duties. I won’t detain you any longer.”

She nodded, tucking her wand back in her sleeve as she headed for the door. But then she stopped, looking back at him over her shoulder.

“Good day, Headmaster.”

“Yes, well... good day.”

Despite that bright spot, Severus was miserable. He’d made a mess of things with Lily... had acted like a total git, really. That was why he was acting like one now, deducting House Points and handing out detentions as he made his way back through the halls. He wasn’t angry at the students. No, he was infuriated with himself.

At first, he headed for his quarters, desperate to make things right. But then he stopped, realizing he had no idea how to do that.

What he needed was time. He had to get his head straight, decide exactly what to say before he said it. Granted, he hated leaving her up there by herself, no doubt as unhappy as he was. But he couldn’t go to her just yet. No, he couldn’t run the risk of making things worse.

Switching directions, he made his way to the Front Entrance, pausing to breathe in the frigid January air as he stepped outside. Soon enough, he was walking beside the lake, soothed by this rare moment of solitude as he began to put his thoughts in order.

Lily was pregnant.

Well, obviously. He’d suspected it from the instant he’d woken up that morning, his own stomach twisting in knots as he’d listened to her retching in the bathroom. Shocking? Yes, he supposed it had been... but not nearly as shocking as his initial reaction.

The first thing he’d felt was... *thrilled*.

Absurd, but there it was. He’d been hit by an onslaught of emotion — strange and bewildering, but certainly not bad. The thought of Lily being pregnant, the very real possibility that she might bear his child?

*His* child. The *mother* of his child.

At last, he’d truly understood what those concepts *meant*, overwhelmed by a rush of masculine pride. Stronger than that even had been the urge to protect, something primal and instinctive and deeply possessive. It was the need to be there every step of the way, to make sure that...

Only then had he been hit by the implications, struck by a sense of helplessness. How could he hope to do much of *anything* for Lily or their child? How could he keep them safe from harm when he was living on borrowed time himself? Two more Horcruxes gone... there couldn't be more than three left. How much longer could it possibly take for the boy to locate the next one and destroy it?

As soon as that happened, there could be no more hesitation. Only Nagini would be left, and of course, it would hardly be possible to destroy the snake without the Dark Lord knowing about it. The final showdown would have to happen immediately. Otherwise, what would there be to stop him from splitting his soul all over again?

At that thought, Severus had pulled on his trousers, creeping toward the bathroom on hesitant feet. By then, joy had been replaced by despair, the awful realization that he might be dead in a matter of days, weeks... months, if he were lucky. But no longer than that. Indeed, there was a good chance he wouldn't even be around to see the child growing inside her, let alone hope to be present when it was born.

That had been a crushing realization, far more distressing than he'd ever imagined when he'd talked about getting her pregnant all those months ago. It was the hard, cold truth that hypotheticals were quite different than reality.

Silently, he'd pushed the door open, staring down at Lily as she'd knelt on the floor. She'd whimpered, a sound of pure misery, oblivious to his presence as she'd heaved into the toilet. And then suddenly, his own sense of loss had ceased to matter. All he'd been able to think about was her...

Or more specifically, what he'd condemned her to.

She would suffer for this baby. Yes, she'd pay the price, whether she wanted it or not. Pregnancy was no easy thing, and the act of bringing that child into the world...

Severus had never seen a woman give birth, but he understood that it was a deeply painful, sometimes even life-threatening ordeal. His own mother had been through a long and difficult labor, had nearly died in the process. And what about the woman who'd brought the Dark Lord into being? She'd given her life for that regrettable act, too lost to her own grief to find the will to survive. Who was to say that it wouldn't be the same for Lily?

When Harry died, she'd be devastated, to say the least. If it happened early enough, she might easily lose the child. But what if it didn't? What if this bloody war dragged out for another eight or nine months? If Harry fell at the last minute, leaving her no time to recover from the loss before she went into labor... yes, it was hard to imagine that the ordeal wouldn't kill her outright.

At that thought, Severus had nearly vomited right along with her. The idea that he'd put this... *thing* inside her, a part of him that could destroy her in the end...

"How long?" he'd asked her as soon as the episode had passed.

But he'd already known the answer. As if he could've forgotten that night, the way he'd taken her again and again as if it could never be enough. He hadn't even thought about precautions until the next morning, when he'd fully intended on brewing a potion for her.

Unfortunately, it had slipped his mind over the course of an extremely busy day, only occurring to him again when it was too late to make any difference.

He'd shrugged it off, reminding himself that it was only one night. He'd been making love to her for months with no precautions and nothing had happened. Why should this time be any different?

Because the fates were fucking sadistic.

Indeed, he'd despised himself in that moment, cursing himself for a bloody fool. Why he'd ever even imagined getting her pregnant was a good idea... in the middle of a fucking war? He'd deluded himself. It was as simple as that. He'd seen only what he'd *wanted* to see, a vision of Lily smiling peacefully, cradling a newborn child in her arms. Something to hope for... to live for...

He certainly hadn't imagined her heaving on the bathroom floor, sweat drenched and miserable. Of course, the rational part of his mind had known that illness was to be expected, among other things. But the reality...

"You know, we don't know for certain."

His reaction to those words? Bewildering. They'd filled him with wild hope, mingled with crushing disappointment. Hope that she wasn't pregnant? Disappointment if she was? Yes, that would've made sense. But then he'd realized that the opposite was true. Despite logic, despite all his best intentions, there'd still been a part of him that had *wanted* her to be pregnant. Stupid. Selfish. Disgustingly so. But yes, he'd still felt that strange longing, hating himself for his inability to put it from his mind.

"Do you want to cast the charm?" he'd asked her.

She'd asked him to wait, as if struggling with her own mixed feelings. Unfortunately, by the time she'd told him to go ahead, his panic had risen to a fever pitch. Once he cast that charm, for good or ill, there'd be no going back.

Coming back to the present, Severus brushed the snow off a fallen log and sat down, burying his head in his hands. He'd handled the situation terribly. Indeed, he'd been so caught up in his own anxieties that he'd disregarded whatever she might've been feeling. But he still remembered what he'd seen in her eyes. Fear, hope, pain. But that wasn't all. No, there'd been an edge of desperation there, too. Like there was something she'd needed from him — needed *badly* — that he'd refused to give.

What was it? He had no idea.

And that, he knew, was what scared him the most.

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Lily felt Severus slide into bed behind her, though she didn't acknowledge his presence. She'd had an awful afternoon, sobbing on the couch until the lingering stench from those blasted sausages had sent her running back to the bathroom. From there, she'd gone straight to bed, tossing and turning as she'd awaited his return.

Now? She didn't know if she had it in her to have another discussion, to be reminded all over again that he saw her pregnancy as a mistake.

"Are you awake?" he whispered, his cold fingers brushing against her cheek.

With that, she gave in, flipping onto her back with a weary sigh. "Yes."

"Can we talk?"

"I'm tired, Severus. Can't it wait until morning?"

"This won't take long." Lifting his wand, he ignited a handful of candles, his features etched sharply beneath the golden light. He looked... *haggard*. That was the only word Lily could think of to describe his appearance, his eyes haunted, face pale with fatigue.

"All right," she said, pushing herself into a sitting position. "I'm listening."

"You've been crying."

"What did you expect?"

"I didn't... I don't know. Lily, I..." He paused, letting out a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry. What happened earlier... it wasn't my intention to..."

"To treat it like some horrible mistake? That's what it is to you, isn't it? Why lie about it?"

"No," he said quietly. "It isn't a mistake. It's a complication. One I find... frightening."

"Frightening?"

"I've gotten you pregnant," he said, his voice stilted. "In the middle of a war. For all I know, this will end in disaster. And even if it doesn't? What can I possibly offer you and..."

"The baby."

He responded with a jerky nod. "Security? Protection? I have no *idea* what's going to happen. How can I... fuck, I'm an idiot..."

"No," she said, dismayed by his rising panic. "You're not."

"I might not even *be* here when your time comes, I..."

"Severus, this isn't your fault. No, and it isn't something you've chosen for me either. It's my decision to make."

"Potion?" He looked surprised, as if he hadn't even considered that possibility.

She nodded. "I could end it right now, you know."

"Is that what you want?"

"What do *you* want?"

He opened his mouth and then hesitated, swallowing hard.

"Severus," she said softly. "It's a simple question — do you want this or not?"

"Yes," he whispered.

She panicked, realizing how vague her question had been. What was he saying? That he wanted the baby? God, she hoped so, though she couldn't forget the way he'd reacted that morning. What if he wanted her to terminate the pregnancy? She had no intention of doing that, of course, but it would break her heart to know he felt that way. How could she stay here with him, pregnant with a child he didn't even *want*?

"Could you..." She paused, swallowing a knot of fear. "Could you be more specific?"

"Yes," he repeated, sounding more steady. "I *do* want the child. However, if you don't, I will accept..."

With that, she launched herself at him, kissing him hard on the mouth. He sucked in a sharp breath, obviously shocked by her reaction. But then his body relaxed, his arms sliding around her, hands burying themselves in her hair. He kissed her back, slow and deep, obviously as relieved as she was that the tension had been broken.

And then at last, he pulled away, letting out a shuddering sigh. "I do want it," he said. "More than I thought I would, especially under the circumstances. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm... worried. I don't know what this will do to you. I don't even..."

"Severus," she said, sliding her hand over his. "I've done this before, you know."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that. But you must remember that I have not. I don't want to make a mess of things."

"You won't."

"I already have," he pointed out, looking ashamed. "We've only known for a matter of hours, and I've already made you cry."

"It happens. Actually, it'll be happening *a lot* once the mood swings kick in." She paused, resisting the urge to chuckle at his expression. "But if I know you want this — *truly* want it — you don't have to worry about hurting me. The rest? I can handle it. We'll handle it together."

"Together," he repeated, his voice strangely hollow.

But before she could question him about his peculiar tone, he was urging her to lie down. He stared up at the ceiling as she rested her head on his shoulder, his fingers lazily caressing her back. But then those fingers started to wander, brushing her side, her hip, ghosting over her stomach before he drew them away.

"You can touch me," she said softly.

Silently, he nodded, unbuttoning her nightgown as she rolled onto her back to give him better access. And then his warm palm was sliding across her skin, coming to rest on her lower abdomen. Of course, it was as flat as ever — six weeks was far too soon to feel any change. No, the difference was in the way he touched her, his expression full of quiet wonder as his hand moved up to her breasts.

"They're..."

"Bigger," she finished for him, glancing down at herself. "I still can't believe I didn't notice."

“Only just.”

She chuckled. “For now.”

“Does it hurt?” he asked, frowning as he gave one of them a little squeeze.

“Not until you did that. Ow!”

“My apologies,” he murmured, withdrawing his hand and replacing it with his mouth. His lips were featherlight as they moved across her skin, eliciting a soft moan as he drew a nipple into his mouth. He sucked gently, his warm breath making her shiver. “Better?”

“Mmmm...”

He made love to her after that, slower and more tender than he ever had before. It was the last thing she’d expected that night, but it seemed natural somehow, leaving her breathless with satisfaction in the aftermath. They lay there quietly, exchanging one last, drowsy kiss as his hand slid down to rest on her stomach.

“Severus?”

“Hmmm?”

She moved her hand down to cover his, her lips curving into a smile as her eyes drifted closed.

“Happy birthday.”

## 71. A Dismal Fate

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### Chapter 71: A Dismal Fate

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The next day dawned with a sense of wonder for Lily, sending her straight to the bathroom to stare in the mirror. There wasn't much to see just yet, but if she looked closer, it was obvious that her breasts were slightly bigger. Just to imagine... even now, they were growing, changing, all in preparation to feed her newborn child.

Her child. Severus's child. She grinned at her reflection, sliding her robe back on as she headed to the bedroom.

Severus was propped up against the pillows, reading the latest issue of *The Daily Prophet*. Beside him was a half eaten tray of food — she'd done better with her second attempt to bring him breakfast in bed, probably because she'd made sure to skip the sausages this time.

"You look... *pleased*," he said as he glanced up, his eyes sweeping over her from head to toe.

Smiling, she dropped onto the bed beside him. "I am. I can't believe..."

"Yes," he said wryly. "I'm still getting used to the idea myself."

"I'm a bit worried about the timing though."

"Understandable. Having a child in the middle of a war is hardly..."

"No," she said. "It isn't that. It's just that I got pregnant near the end of November."

"Yes?" He set his paper aside, fixing her with an expectant look.

"That means I'm due in August. Mid to late August."

He nodded. "I suppose so."

"Well, don't you think that might be a problem?"

"Not necessarily."

Lily frowned, surprised that he hadn't picked up on the implications. "We'll need to return to Hogwarts around then, won't we? I won't be able to Apparate with a newborn, and it's not like I can take the train."

"No, you most certainly cannot. But..."

"Besides, there's no telling if I'll even be in any shape to travel. I bounced back pretty quickly after Harry was born, but that was almost twenty years ago. It might not be that easy this time around."



Severus cleared his throat, casting a dubious look at her stomach. "Yes, I'm well aware of that. However..."

"Unless you were planning on staying here for the summer? I suppose that would make more sense."

"Lily."

"Then again... *house elves*? I know you said they could help me, but what if something goes wrong? What if..."

"Lily," he repeated, his voice quiet. "I wouldn't worry about that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's unlikely that I'll be returning to Hogwarts next year."

"Why do you say that? The war?"

He inclined his head. "I expect it will be over by then."

"So soon?"

"There are only three Horcruxes left. Time is running short."

"But I haven't..." Suddenly, all she could think about was that huge stack of books in the study, which hadn't yielded a scrap of useful information. But she decided not to mention them, not wanting to see that *look* in his eyes. On the surface, he'd accepted her efforts to save Harry. He'd even brought her quite a few books to help with her search. But he never quite managed to disguise that look of pity, the one that suggested that all her efforts were futile.

"Well, why *wouldn't* we come back here?" she said instead. "You'll still need to work, won't you?"

"I've remained at Hogwarts for the sake of the war effort, not as a matter of personal choice. At any rate, I hardly think I'd be welcome back here after... everything."

"Once everyone knows the truth..."

He shook his head. "It isn't that simple, Lily. Besides, my future employment prospects are hardly the issue. We're discussing your condition, yes? Your anxiety over where you'll be when your time comes?"

"Yes."

"Well, let me assure you..."

Lily gave him a sharp look. "Where *I'll* be?"

"Yes," he said, not seeming to notice her scrutiny. "If the war is over by then, and I'm fairly certain it will be, you'll have your choice of locations. St. Mungo's, if you'd like. Or somewhere more private if you prefer. That decision will be yours to make later on. It isn't anything you need to worry about just yet."

"And where will *you* be?" she said quietly.

Lily had accomplished a rare thing. She'd caught Severus completely off guard, his eyes widening in surprise as he struggled for an answer. "With you," he said after a moment, sounding strained. "Of course."

"Then why do you talk about it like I'm going to be alone?"

He shook his head. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to. Especially after what you told me yesterday."

"I said a lot of things yesterday. What in particular are you referring to?"

"You said, 'I might not even *be* here when your time comes'. Remember?"

"We're in the middle of a war, Lily," he said, seeming to recover somewhat. "Between that and the precarious position I happen to be in, it would be foolish *not* to consider that possibility. My survival is by no means guaranteed."

"No, it's more than that. You never talk about the future. You never make plans."

"It's rather difficult to plan a future when I don't even know where I'll be from one day to the next. Some things must simply be put on hold for the time being."

She shook her head, fighting back the urge to cry. "Don't lie to me, Severus. Please."

Abruptly, he stood up, but not before she saw a flash of anguish in his eyes. He jerked on his robes, lacing up his boots with a series of sharp yanks before he strode over to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I have duties to attend to," he said stiffly.

With that, he left the room, making her flinch as he slammed the door behind him. She could hear his footsteps fading away, swift and purposeful as he retreated down the hall. But suddenly, they stopped, growing louder as they finally resumed. He flung the bedroom door open with a bang, breathing hard as his eyes met hers.

"If I ever leave you, Lily," he said, his voice low. "It will not be a matter of choice. That is all you need to know."

"Severus..."

"I'll be back later."

Once he was gone, Lily paced the floors, attempting to come to terms with this new revelation. Severus didn't see his death as a vague possibility. No, he believed it was the most likely outcome. But why?

The whole thing was as bewildering as it was upsetting, yet it did help her to make sense of his behavior. His panic over her pregnancy, yes, but other things, too. The way he looked at her sometimes, the urgency in his touch...

Well, it was lots of things, really. But that wasn't the point, was it?

No. She needed to know *why*. What made him believe that he didn't have a chance? The simple fact that he was a spy? No, it had to be something more than that. He'd been working

against Voldemort for almost twenty years. If he hadn't been caught by now, what reason was there to think he ever would be?

Because of Harry?

Granted, revealing the truth about the final Horcrux probably *would* mean blowing his cover. But what was Harry going to do — hand him over to Voldemort? Of course not.

Troubled, Lily took a quick shower, hardly aware of what she was doing as she dried off and slipped into a clean robe. Before she knew it, she was wandering up and down the passageways, pausing to peek through every crack she could find. More than an hour had passed before she spotted Charity, hoping like hell the cat wouldn't scamper off as she waited for a pair of Ravenclaws to disappear around the corner.

"Charity!"

The cat turned her head, making Lily moan as she saw what was dangling from her mouth.

Lily?

"Passage," she said, careful to keep her voice low.

Charity moved closer, affording a better view of the tiny corpse. It was a freshly killed mouse, a hideously mangled thing, leaving splotches of blood across the pale stone floor. Lily pressed a hand to her mouth, feeling her stomach lurch.

*Want me to come find you?*

"Ten minutes."

Slumping against the wall, she heaved up her meager breakfast, managing to Vanish the mess and clean herself up before the cat arrived.

*What is it?* Charity thought at her as she approached. *Is something wrong?*

"You might say that."

*Tell me.*

"Do you know where Minerva is?"

*Minerva?* The cat echoed. *It's Sunday, isn't it?*

"Yes."

*She's probably in her office grading papers.*

"Can you find out if she can meet up with me? I really need to talk."

Soon enough, they were gathered in an ancient parlor, a recent discovery of Charity's. From the front, it was only accessible through a small storeroom in the back of the Transfiguration classroom, hidden behind a towering pile of crates. Casting a Revealing Charm at the wall would reveal a narrow corridor, one that branched off in multiple directions. Only by choosing the right one could anyone reach the door to the parlor.

Still, Lily was cautious, casting *Muffliato* as she warded the door. Finally, she turned her attention to her companions, glad to see that Minerva had thought to bring tea. Her stomach

still felt unsettled, which wasn't helped by the topic she needed to discuss.

"Sugar?"

"Yes, please," she said, accepting the cup with a nod of thanks. She took a long sip then set it back on its saucer, lifting her eyes to meet Minerva's.

"I'm sorry to interrupt whatever you were doing. I just..."

Minerva scoffed, waving a dismissive hand. "Grading essays can wait. It's always a pleasure to see you, my dear."

"Likewise."

"This isn't a social visit though, is it?"

Lily shook her head. "I'm afraid not. It's... well, it's about Severus."

*What about him?* Charity prompted.

"He's..." And then not knowing how else to say it, she just blurted it out. "He thinks he's going to die."

Minerva and Charity exchanged a quick glance.

"Well," Minerva said after a moment, obviously making an effort to keep her voice gentle. "He's in a dangerous position. Of course, he must accept the possibility that..."

"No, that's not what I mean. It's like he doesn't believe he has *any* chance of surviving this war." Lily turned her attention to Charity before she continued. "I need to know what you've heard. What you know. You have to tell me everything."

*I really don't think...*

"You owe me this," she said fiercely, caught off guard by a surge of anger. "You knew about Harry, didn't you? Long before I ever found out. You *knew*."

Yes, the cat admitted. *But I didn't mean to keep it from you. Truly, I didn't. I just didn't see where was my place to tell you.*

"You should have. I had a right to know." She paused, taking a deep breath. "And I have a right to know about Severus, too. Please don't do this to me again."

*Honestly, I don't know what to say.*

"Just tell me what you've heard. Is it Dumbledore? Has he been telling Severus that he has to die? Convinced him that there's no other way, like he did with..."

*It isn't anything specific,* the cat interrupted. *It's just the way they talk about it sometimes, like it's an accepted fact. To tell you the truth, I think it's been that way all along. I think that's the outcome they've always expected, maybe even what Severus wanted at one time. Of course, I'm sure he feels differently now, but it might be too late...*

"It's not too late!" Lily snapped, struggling to bring her temper under control.

*Dumbledore seems to think...*

“Like I give a damn what Dumbledore thinks? Nasty, manipulative old git!”

Minerva sucked in a sharp breath. “Lily, I understand why you’re upset. In your position, I suppose anyone would be. But whatever Albus has done, I’m sure...”

“Oh, don’t start making excuses for him. I can’t stand it!”

“All right, dear,” she said, reaching out to pat Lily’s arm. “All right. Why don’t you just tell us what you need from us then? What can we do to help you?”

Somehow, those words had a calming effect on Lily, her anger replaced by a rush of shame. She lowered her head, her eyes filling with tears.

“I just... I don’t want to lose them.”

“Of course you don’t,” Minerva said gently.

And then suddenly, Lily was enveloped in a warm embrace, her body shaking with sobs. Until that moment, she hadn’t realized how much she’d needed to break down, to admit how truly helpless she felt. Granted, Severus did his best to comfort her whenever she was upset, but that was different. She had to be mindful of his feelings as well, knowing he’d take personal responsibility for her distress. This was the first chance she’d had to truly let go, to give voice to her deepest fears without worrying about hurting the person who was listening.

“I... I can’t lose either of them. Oh god, and I can’t lose them both. That would kill me. I couldn’t...”

“Shhh. It’s all right.”

“I just... I can’t have this baby alone.”

She didn’t realize what she’d said until the words had already left her mouth, cringing as she felt Minerva stiffen.

“You’re *pregnant*?”

Silently, she nodded.

“Severus,” Minerva whispered. “You bloody fool.”

“It’s not his fault.”

“No?”

“No,” she repeated, her voice firm. “It was an accident. We both... well, it doesn’t matter now. This is what I want.”

“To be pregnant in the middle of a war?”

Lily sighed. “I’ll admit that the situation isn’t ideal, especially if Severus doesn’t expect to survive. But you know...” She sank back into her chair, hesitating for a long moment before she continued. “Even if I do lose him, I’ll still want this child. I know I will.”

“But you said it yourself,” Minerva pointed out. “You don’t want to go through this alone.”

The picture Lily’s mind conjured up was dismal. She saw herself lying in bed, heartbroken and sick with grief as she struggled to give birth to her child. The pain... she knew from

experience how bad it could be, a place where no reality existed beyond the desperate, all-encompassing need to make it stop. Only when she came back to her senses would she remember he was gone, her labor pains replaced by a different sort of agony as she braced herself for the next contraction.

But what would follow?

With that thought, the vision changed. She was still in bed, her face pale with fatigue, cheeks wet with tears. But this time, there was a small, dark head cradled in her hand, a pair of tiny lips nuzzling at her breast. She was still crying, yes, but this was something different. Sadness was mingled with gratitude, the realization that he hadn't left her completely. There'd always be a part of him in the child they'd created, hers to love, to cherish...

Yes, that was the real question. If Severus was destined to die, was this still something she was prepared to do? She'd already chosen to have this child, yes, but there was a bigger commitment to be made. It meant that no matter how much she might lose in the coming months, no matter how devastated she might be, she was obligated to *live*.

Could she do that? If she lost Harry or Severus... if god forbid, she lost them both, would she still have the will to go on?

"Yes."

"What?"

Lily cleared her throat. "Yes, I *did* say that. Of course I'd prefer not to have my baby alone. But even if I could go back to the night when it was conceived, I wouldn't change the outcome. I can't help thinking there was a reason for it, you know? How could a child created out of so much love be a mistake?"

"I see," Minerva said, all her attention suddenly focused on the teapot. Her reaction wasn't surprising — Lily could only imagine how awkward this must be for her. Discussing her pregnancy in general terms was one thing, but alluding to how it had happened in the first place? Granted, she hadn't said anything untoward, but Gryffindors were notorious for their active imaginations.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Embarrass me? Psh."

Lily studied Minerva's reddened cheeks, resisting the urge to giggle. Silly, perhaps, but the moment of levity was exactly what she'd needed. She felt calmer now, able to look at the situation more objectively.

"Severus isn't dead," she said after a moment, her voice quiet. "Nor is Harry. I still have time, and I intend to do whatever I can to save them."

"Yes, dear, but how? What are you planning to do?"

Lily sighed. "I don't know, but I need to do *something*. Otherwise, I'll go crazy."

Minerva nodded. "Well, perhaps there's something you can do for Severus. But Harry? From what I understand, Dumbledore believed..."

"I don't give a toss what Dumbledore believed," Lily interrupted, though not with her former vehemence. "All right, let's say he did explore every possible alternative could think of. Let's say he truly believed this was the only way. Fair enough, but that doesn't mean it is."

"Albus was the most powerful wizard in living memory. If he couldn't find another solution, what makes you think you can?"

"Because," Lily said, lifting her cup to her lips. "Even Dumbledore didn't know everything."

Minerva shook her head, her expression grim. "I'm afraid you're only setting yourself up for a terrible disappointment."

Lily shrugged. "Maybe you're right. But if I'm going to lose him — either of them — at least I'll know that I did everything I could to stop it. In the end, that'll be far more comforting than giving up. I don't want to spend the rest of my life wondering if I could've changed the outcome if I'd tried."

"Yes, I do see your point. If there's anything we can do to help..." Minerva paused to look down at the cat, who was bobbing her head. "Please let us know."

"There isn't much that any of us can do for Harry at the moment," Lily said, suppressing a sigh. "I have books... terrible books. I'm trying to understand how these Horcruxes work, if there's anything we don't already know. I haven't found anything yet, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. I'm planning to go back to the Restricted Section today — I've been through all the most obvious books, but I'm sure there are a few I've missed."

Minerva frowned. "You've revealed yourself to *Pince*?"

"No, of course not."

"How do you manage to get in and out of there without her catching you? That woman is a vulture."

"I'm careful," Lily said, finishing the last of her tea as she rose to her feet. "Very careful. Don't worry about me."

"Yes, well," Minerva said, her eyes darting to Lily's stomach. "You're making that rather difficult to avoid."

Lily smiled. "I know what I'm doing."

"I hope so."

## 72. Breath of Fresh Air

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### Chapter 72: Breath of Fresh Air

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Over the next few weeks, Lily's life settled into a comfortable routine. Well, not *comfortable*, exactly. Her morning sickness was awful, far worse than she remembered when she'd been pregnant with Harry. It plagued her day and night, the slightest whiff of anything unpleasant sending her racing for the toilet.

Granted, the long hours she'd been spending in Severus's lab weren't helping. She'd inadvertently ruined several potions, having had no choice but to step away at a crucial moment to get sick. But the rest had been brewed to perfection, making her feel like she was finally doing something *useful* with her time.

She'd begun splitting her days between potions and research, heading for the lab as soon as Severus left for work in the morning. Afternoons were spent in the study, sifting through an endless pile of books in search of any scrap of information that might help Harry. She'd keep that up until determination gave way to fatigue, another symptom of her pregnancy that seemed more severe this time around. Inevitably, she'd fall asleep, not waking until Severus returned.

"What about my spell?" she asked him one night, rubbing her eyes as he took the book from her lap.

*"Ligatis Animalia?"*

"It saved me. Why couldn't it save Harry?"

"Lily..." He paused, letting out a heavy sigh as he dropped onto the couch beside her. "The purpose of that spell is to preserve one's soul. To prevent it from being destroyed, yes?"

She nodded.

"Who's to say it wouldn't do the same for a Horcrux?"

"The Horcrux wouldn't be the target. Harry would."

"Does the spell have the ability to separate the two?"

She hesitated, accepting the cup of tea he placed in her hands. "Well, it's a protection spell. We know that much."

"Yes, and little else. Logically, one would assume that the spell would be limited to its intended recipient. But that is merely an assumption."

"If it would save Harry..."

He shook his head. "Without more information, we cannot afford to take that risk."



“But...”

“Lily,” he said quietly. “If that final Horcrux was preserved somehow, what do you imagine would happen? By then, the Dark Lord would know that the others had been destroyed. He’d split his soul again and again, concealing the pieces where they’d never be found. Thus far, it’s only his vanity that has worked in our favor. He truly believed we’d never discover his secret, that he could hide the bloody things right under our noses without fear of repercussion. If he realizes that isn’t the case...”

“He’d be a lot more careful.”

Severus nodded, though he hardly seemed to be listening. “If he realizes that isn’t the case,” he repeated, “that’ll be the end for us. He’ll rip his soul to shreds if that’s what it takes, each sundering creating a deeper level of madness. He’ll never be stopped, he’ll...”

“Yes, you’re right.” Lily reached out to touch his hand, unnerved by his haunted expression. “Anyway, it was just a thought. I’ll keep looking.”

He responded with a curt nod. “Have you eaten today?”

“What?”

“Have you eaten?”

“Twice,” she said, resisting the urge to smile.

Yes, this pregnancy was already proving to be quite different than her first. Despite his initial panic, Severus had adjusted surprisingly well, becoming much more involved than she might’ve expected. As with anything he considered to be his responsibility, he approached it with an air of quiet determination, attentive to even the most minor details.

Not that James had treated her badly. He’d been kind enough, positively thrilled that she was carrying his baby. But he’d dealt with her condition the way she’d assumed any man would — bragging to his friends, picking out names or sliding a possessive hand over her belly. He’d never tired of discussing how brilliant their child would be, had been anxious as she was to see it born. But the finer details, the various discomforts? He’d hardly seemed to notice those.

Granted, that might’ve been her fault. It had seemed normal to *Muffliato* whenever she’d ducked into the bathroom, to avoid complaining about her aches and pains. She’d even hidden most of her mood swings from him, slipping into the shower whenever she’d needed a good cry. That was simply the way it had been with James — she’d gone out of her way to be pleasant for his sake, to avoid anything that might distress him. Of course, he’d never asked that of her, certainly not during her pregnancy. But he’d also found comfort in pretending everything was okay, in only seeing what he’d wanted to see.

Insensitive? Perhaps. Or maybe it had just been his underlying innocence, the perspective of a boy who’d had yet to experience the harsher realities of life.

With Severus, it was the opposite. He never accepted anything at face value, would grow anxious, even irritable, if he couldn’t identify the source of a problem. If she tried to convince him that she wasn’t sick or tired, upset or uncomfortable, he’d see right through it. He’d be

distressed by his inability to help, frustrated that she *wasn't* sharing all the details, no matter how unpleasant those details might be.

That, she supposed, was the biggest difference between Severus and James. One had been a boy, accustomed to being taken care of... the other was a man who was far more comfortable servicing others. Such a huge distinction, one she couldn't help but appreciate. She loved the attention, couldn't get enough of his constant concern. If he happened to be around when she got sick, he'd bathe her face with cool water, even if he had to crawl out of bed at 3 AM to do it. He kept her supplied with nutrient potions, took pains to bring her the healthiest food, even cast charms to monitor her condition.

In the beginning, she'd protested this behavior. He already had too much on his shoulders, and besides, she was pregnant, not terminally ill. But in the end, she'd realized it was something he needed, too, perhaps even more than she did. He seemed to find comfort through his caretaking, his expression more peaceful whenever he focused his attention on her.

It was overcompensation, really. She knew he still blamed himself for getting her pregnant, that he worried over what she might suffer in the months to come. Of course, she'd tried to reassure him that it didn't matter, that it would all be worth it in the end. But her words made little difference. No, Severus needed to take action, desperate to prove that he was capable of providing for her the way he felt she deserved. It was something deeply instinctive and intrinsically male, the only approach that seemed to ease his anxieties.

Lily didn't understand it. Not completely. But she welcomed it nonetheless, realizing that it benefited them both, not to mention their unborn child. As a result, their relationship was stronger than ever, her pregnancy deepening the bond between them in ways she would've never expected.

Yes, where she and Severus were concerned, she'd never been more content. And yet she was still distressed by thoughts of the future, his persistent belief that he was doomed to die. But she kept that to herself, realizing that his refusal to talk about it was absolute. All she could do was focus on the present, keep searching for solutions and hope for the best.

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"Happy birthday."

Lily opened her eyes to find the bedroom dappled in sunlight, smiling as she spotted Severus standing beside the bed. He had a tray of dishes balanced on one arm, setting it down with a flourish before he straightened to remove his cloak.

"It's a poor excuse for breakfast in bed," he said with a shrug. "Under the circumstances, however..."

Holding her breath, she leaned forward to inspect the food more closely. There was a platter of dry toast, two bowls filled with fruit and yogurt, along with a pot of warm peppermint tea. She inhaled deeply, waiting for the rush of nausea she'd come to expect. Instead, all she felt was hunger, along with a great deal of gratitude.

"This is perfect," she said quietly. "Thank you."

He moved to sit beside her, watching her eat for several minutes before he spoke again.

“How are you feeling?”

She rolled her eyes, swallowing a mouthful of toast before she answered. “Fine.”

“Good. I have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Yes. Finish eating and then get dressed. Wear something warm.”

“Warm?” She frowned. “Why...”

“You’ll see.”

Soon enough, she was bundled up in a soft woolen robe, thoroughly confused as she put on the scarf and mittens he’d transfigured for her.

“This, too.” He stepped forward, wrapping a heavy cloak around her shoulders before he nodded in satisfaction. “Ready?”

“Yes, but I don’t know...”

“You’re not supposed to know,” he said as he pushed open the bedroom door. “I believe that’s why it’s called a surprise.”

Silently, she followed him down the hall, only to stop in her tracks as they reached the entrance to their quarters.

“We can’t go out there!”

“Says who?”

“No one’s supposed to know...”

He shrugged. “The portraits are well aware of your existence. Everyone else has been expressly forbidden from visiting my office this morning. Now come.”

Lily sucked in a sharp breath, cringing as he pushed the tapestry aside. Her first instinct was to run straight back to the bedroom... until a pair of piercing blue eyes met her own, narrowing in disapproval. Just like that, her hesitation turned into open defiance, her head held high as she stepped into the office.

“Over here, Lily.”

“Here?” she said as she joined Severus in the center of the room.

“Yes. Hold on to me.”

She took his arm, her breath catching in her throat as she realized what he was about to do.

“Severus, no!”

But that didn’t come from her. No, it was the portrait who cried out in protest, a stern voice that faded to nothing as her world dissolved in a swirl of shapes and colors. She closed her eyes, struggling to ignore the dizzying sensations as she buried her face in Severus’s shoulder. And then at last, it was over, marked by a smooth landing on a bank of powdery snow.

“Oh no,” she whispered, pressing a hand to her churning stomach.

“I’m an idiot. Fuck.”

“No, you’re not. Just... give me a minute.”

She kept her eyes closed, leaning against him to steady herself as she breathed slowly through her nose. All she wanted to do was bend over and retch, but she fought back against the urge, not wanting to ruin whatever surprise he’d planned for her. It didn’t matter that she would’ve probably gotten sick at some point this morning, with or without the Apparition. He’d still blame himself, which would put a damper on the entire day.

*Breathe, Lily. Breathe.*

“Lily?”

Slowly, she opened her eyes, then flashed him a brilliant smile. “It’s gone.”

Only then did she have a proper look at her surroundings, her eyes growing wide as they swept across the horizon. There were mountains in every direction, a vast expanse of deep greens, rich browns, and powdery white, the sky above her as blue as a robin’s egg.

“I thought it would please you,” he said with a shrug. “You haven’t been outside in months.”

“I...” But she couldn’t speak, inhaling the fresh, pine scented air as she lifted her head to gaze up at the sky. She’d forgotten how beautiful the world could be, hardly able to recall the last time she’d felt the exquisite sensation of brisk winter air electrifying her skin. It was an experience that was distinctly human, one that made her feel...

*Alive.*

Yes, that was it. She felt more alive than she ever had before, shaken to the core by a flood of emotion she had no idea how to cope with.

“Are you all right?”

Unable to help herself, she burst into tears.

“Shit,” Severus muttered, his expression bewildered as she turned to bury her face in his chest. “What did I do?”

She couldn’t answer until the emotional onslaught had run its course, shaking her head in mute denial.

“Clearly, you’re upset. If you wish to return to Hogwarts...”

“No!” she said, swiping at her eyes as she pulled away. “No, this is... it’s wonderful.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “First, I nearly made you vomit,” he said wryly. “Then I made you cry. I’m not sure that ‘wonderful’ is the appropriate word for this situation.”

“Wonderful,” she repeated more firmly, rising up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “And I’m crying because I’m happy, you git.”

“I see. Well, it would be nice if one could tell the difference.”

Lily wandered across the clearing, leaning down to pluck a winter flower from a bush. She held it to her nose, sighing in contentment as she glanced back at him over her shoulder.

“This is safe?”

Of course, there was no need to ask. He would never have brought her to such a place if it wasn’t secure. But she was interested in the details, which he seemed happy enough to share.

“Our presence is undetectable, all the way to that outcropping of rocks. And over here... you may go as far as that thicket of trees.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “It was your son who gave me the idea. Well, him and those wretched friends of his. *Salvio Hexia*, *Protego Totalum*, *Repello Muggletum*, *Muffliato*... I cast a few others as well, more obscure spells that the children wouldn’t know. It doesn’t hurt that we’re in one of the most remote areas of Scotland, way up in the Highlands. Trust me... you have nothing to fear.”

She nodded. “How long can we stay?”

“A few hours, perhaps.”

They lingered throughout the afternoon, their hands entwined as they walked leisurely beneath the trees. As if by some unspoken agreement, they only talked of pleasant things — childhood memories and magical theory, followed by possible names for their future child. When neither could come up with anything suitable, Lily amused herself by suggesting the worst names she could imagine, giggling at his reactions.

“What about Dolores? Dolores Petunia.”

He shuddered. “I’d rather find myself locked in a passionate embrace with Hagrid.”

“Hagrid... actually, that’s not bad. How about Hagrid Argus?”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“Hey, you brought him up!”

“Fair enough.” He stopped in his tracks, looking thoughtful. “Vernon? Yes, Vernon Dudley Snape. Has a nice ring to it, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’re evil.”

“According to some,” he said with a shrug, “yes.”

“I didn’t mean...”

But he didn’t seem perturbed. No, he was too busy scrutinizing her face, his forehead creasing in a frown. “You’re getting tired.”

“What?” She blinked, thrown by the change of subject.

“Tired,” he repeated. “Perhaps we should...”

“I’m fine.”

Granted, that wasn't exactly true. On top of her pregnancy, which had a way of sapping her energy, she certainly wasn't used to walking for hours on end. If she were back at Hogwarts, no doubt she'd be napping this time of day, curled up on the couch with a book resting in her lap.

But she wasn't ready to go back. Not yet.

"You need to rest," Severus said quietly.

"No, I..."

She trailed off when she realized what he was doing, her next breath emerging as a sigh of relief. He'd removed his cloak, spreading it out beneath a patch of sunlight before he motioned for her to take a seat.

"You don't want to leave," he said as he joined her. "Yes, well, neither do I."

"How much longer can we stay?"

"One more hour."

Lily stretched out on her back, smiling up at him as he propped himself up on one elbow. He opened his mouth, then seemed to change his mind, leaning over to kiss her instead. The touch of his lips was gentle and sweet, his hand resting lightly on her belly as she threaded her fingers through his hair. She didn't expect it to go any further... not until she heard a slight hitch in his breath, one that sent a shiver up her spine.

And then his hand was everywhere, his tongue delving deep in her mouth, his body pressed flush against hers.

"Tell me to stop," he whispered a few minutes later, his warm breath tickling her ear.

"No."

"This is hardly the place."

"Why not?" she said breathlessly. "No one will see."

"That isn't the point." He paused to unfasten his robe, shrugging it off and tossing it aside. "The point is that it's..." Unbuttoning his frock coat, he removed that, too, before turning his attention to his trousers. "Too cold for this."

She moved her hand down, catching his erection as it sprang free. "Are *you* cold?"

"Getting warmer."

"Well, I can always cast a charm." Stroking him gently with one hand, she groped for her wand with the other, murmuring an incantation that elevated the temperature by several degrees. "Better?"

"It will do."

Warming charm or not, she gasped as he slid her robe up over her legs, the chilly January air raising goosebumps on her flesh. But then his body covered hers, the warmth of his skin making her sigh in pleasure as he pushed himself inside her. Grabbing fistfuls of his shirt, she clung to him tightly, watching him with something akin to wonder as he started to move. His

expression was almost fierce in its intensity, his brow furrowed in concentration, black hair framed by a wide expanse of open sky.

Of course, they'd made love countless times back at Hogwarts, but this was something different. Primal, instinctive, more freeing somehow, as if they were the only two people in the world. Granted, no one could hear her back in their quarters either, but here? Here, she cried out with abandon, not stifled in the least by the knowledge of people nearby. No, there was no one... no one except her and Severus, who seemed mesmerized by her reaction, driving into her faster and harder as she fell apart beneath him.

Coming back to her senses, she opened her eyes, flashing him a lazy smile. "Still cold?"

"No," he panted, his hips still rocking against hers. "No, I... fuck..."

His movements became more frantic then, his eyes falling closed as he let out a low groan. One final, jarring thrust, and he pulsed inside her, a hoarse whisper of her name echoing through the trees.

She didn't know how they managed to fall asleep. Maybe it was her cloak that did it, soft, warm wool he pulled over them both as he enveloped her in a cozy embrace. All she knew was that when she closed her eyes, the sun was high overhead... and when she opened them again, it was settling over the horizon, the air so frigid that it set her teeth to chattering.

"Severus? Severus, wake up."

"What... *shit!*"

Hastily, she got to her feet, snatching up her cloak and wrapping it around herself. Meanwhile, Severus was struggling to fasten his trousers, his cold fingers fumbling with the buttons of his frock coat as his breath came in short, panicked bursts.

Yet there was something different in his expression, a change she couldn't help but notice despite his anxiety. He looked peaceful, satisfied, more relaxed than he had in months. And that was the gift she cherished most, one that meant so much more than his determination to please her. It was knowing that he'd done something for himself, too, that he'd had a chance to escape the madness, at least for a while.

"Let's go," he said, holding out his arm.

"Wait."

"Lily, we need to get back to Hogwarts. Besides, it's bloody freezing out here, and..."

Shaking her head, she pressed her fingers to his lips. "I was only going to thank you. This is the best birthday I've ever had."

He stared at her in silence, as if he didn't quite believe what he'd just heard. And then, wonder of wonders, he smiled.

"Come," he said, his voice more gentle this time.

Rather than offering his arm again, he wrapped her in a tight embrace, an air of quiet satisfaction about him as he Apparated them both back to Hogwarts.

## 73. Thwarting Punishment

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### Chapter 73: Thwarting Punishment

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Severus's boots hit the office floor with a thud, though that was nothing compared with the frantic banging at the door. Above that rose the sound of the alarm, a shrill, piercing shriek that made his breath catch in his throat.

"In there," he told Lily, jerking his head at the opposite wall. "Now!"

To his relief, she obeyed without protest, casting one last, worried glance over her shoulder as she slipped behind the tapestry.

He paused, taking a deep breath. "Enter!"

"Can't! Something's bloody wrong with this thing!"

Right. He'd placed wards on the door as an extra precaution... and it was a good thing he had. Otherwise, Amycus would've been waiting right here in his office, there to see Lily with his own eyes. Granted, Severus would've cursed him to hell and back, would've Obliviated him until he'd forgotten his own name. But what if the loathsome little troll had managed to press the Dark Mark in the meantime?

Severus stalked over to the door, throwing it open with a resounding bang. "Yes, Amycus?"

"Headmaster, I know you said you wasn't to be disturbed..."

He inclined his head. "I did."

"Sorry, but we've got a bit of a situation."

"Situation? I'll need you to be more specific."

"The little monster got what was coming to him. Told him what to do and he didn't do it. And then my sister..."

"Just start at the beginning, if you will."

Amycus responded with a jerky nod. "Had a problem with my first years the other day. Hufflepuff girl walked right out in the middle of class. Said she wanted no part of what we was doing."

"Which girl?"

"Don't remember her name."

"I see. And what were you doing that she found so objectionable?"

"Teaching the Cruciatus."



“Ah,” Severus said, feeling a muscle twitch in his jaw. “Care to elaborate?”

“Was rather proud of it, actually. I asked the students which creatures they hated most. Gathered them up, brought them in. Snakes and spiders, all sorts of bugs. Had a dog — big, mean looking thing. Found a rabbit, even got hold of that cat that’s always skulking about.”

“Mrs. Norris?”

“That’s the one.”

Severus nodded. “So these animals... I’m assuming you instructed the students to torture them?”

“That was the plan,” Amycus said, his ugly face twisting into a scowl. “Would’ve gone brilliantly if that little bitch hadn’t left when she did. By the time I got back from chasing her down, all those critters were gone. No idea who let them out, but...”

“And the girl?”

“Detention.”

“So,” Severus said, “the situation was resolved.”

“Not exactly.”

“Meaning?”

“I assigned someone to help with the detention. An older boy who’s been giving me trouble as of late. Had the girl in a cage, and...”

“A cage?” Severus repeated, careful to keep his expression blank.

Amycus shrugged. “Seemed like an appropriate punishment. Teach the little chit to stay put, eh?”

“I’m guessing that plan went awry.”

“You might say that. The boy released her. Told him to punish her, and he released her instead.”

“These... troublemakers. Where are they now?”

“The girl? Don’t know. She ran off again — haven’t been able to find her. Boy’s in the Hospital Wing.”

“Of course he is.”

“He’ll recover.”

“So what,” Severus said, resisting the urge to let out a long-suffering sigh, “is the problem?”

“The problem is that they attacked my sister! She’s laid up in the Hospital Wing, covered head to toe in sores!”

“Who is this ‘they’ you speak of? The boy?”

“Oh no, Headmaster. We had him on the ground, and... well, he wasn’t in any condition to be casting spells.”

“The girl?”

Amycus shook his head. “She was long gone by then. No, it was someone else. Whoever it was, they got Alecto from behind. All of a sudden, she just keeled over. Started screaming like you wouldn’t believe. By the time I figured out what was happening, it was too late.”

“You didn’t see anyone?”

“No. Must’ve run off before I turned around.”

“I see,” Severus said, perching himself on the edge of his desk. “So what do you expect me to do about it?”

“Punish them!”

“That’s rather difficult to do when I don’t know who *they* are.”

“Punish all of them then!”

“You’re asking me to punish *all* of the students? For the actions of one individual?”

“Well, I suppose you could leave the Slytherins out. Don’t imagine any of them are involved.”

“Of course not,” Severus said smoothly. “Nonetheless, I cannot penalize the entire school.”

“But Alecto...”

“What I *will* do is endeavor to find the culprit. Will that satisfy you?”

“Guess it’ll have to do,” Amycus said sullenly.

“Very well. Anything else?”

“You can put my sister to rights.”

Severus frowned. “Isn’t Poppy treating her?”

“Useless old bint,” Amycus said with a snort. “Keeps insisting that she don’t know the cure. Might not be my place to say so, Headmaster, but she ought to be sacked. If you’d heard what she said to me...”

“I’ll take it under consideration. In the meantime, I’ll see about Alecto.”

Amycus nodded in response, then turned and left the office. As soon as the door closed behind him, Severus dropped into the chair behind his desk, letting out a weary sigh.

“You were lucky.”

“Luck?” he said as he swung around to face the portrait. “It had nothing to do with luck. I simply used some measure of common sense.”

“You should’ve never taken her out in the first place. Surely you must realize...”

"That it was dangerous?" he snapped. "Yes... which is why I safeguarded the entire area before taking her there. Or that someone could've spotted her right here in this office? Yes, I realize that, too... which is why I cast the strongest wards imaginable to prevent that from happening."

"Yes, you took precautions. I would've expected nothing less. But why take such a risk? Why, when it was hardly necessary to..."

"Because it was necessary."

"If you needed a break..."

"A *break*?" Severus let out a bitter laugh. "I've spent half my life in service to your cause. Plotting and preparing, dreading the end even as I longed for it. I've had little in the way of peace, no more than five minutes at any given time where I *didn't* have to worry about maintaining my cover, or protecting the students, or whether or not I'd survive another round of torture."

"I'd never question your devotion, Severus. You've done everything that has been asked of you, and more besides. But this isn't the time to start taking chances."

"Nor is it a time to forget what I'm fighting for."

"Lily?"

Severus jerked his head. "Among other things."

"So you took the day off to spend time with her. I suppose that's reasonable enough. But you could've done that right here, safe in the Headmaster's quarters. I see no reason..."

"No," Severus said as he rose to his feet. "You *don't* see. I *never* get a break. No, and I never stop fighting. In the end, I will die for my efforts. Until that happens, I'll live in a cage. I'll fall asleep every night, never knowing when I'll be woken by another summons or that bloody alarm going off. I'll..."

"Severus..."

"I'll live through that, just as I've been doing for months, knowing there's no escape. Yes, and Lily will live through it, too. What precious little time I have left with her will be spent behind these walls, trying to make the best of our captivity while dreading what the future might hold. So forgive me..."

Dumbledore made another attempt to interrupt, but Severus wasn't listening. He was pacing the floors now, black cloak billowing behind him, his eyes fixed on the door.

"So forgive me," he repeated, his voice quiet, "for craving some semblance of a normal life, if only for a few hours. Forgive me for recognizing that same need in Lily, for seeing that she was starved for a freedom neither of us have known since we were children. Forgive us both for needing to pretend that the war didn't exist for one bloody day... something we could never have done here at Hogwarts."

"I only meant..."

Severus shook his head. "I know what you meant. At any rate, I have no more time to discuss it. I have indeed returned safely, which can only mean one thing."

"What's that?" Dumbledore said, sounding strangely subdued.

"I have duties to attend to."

Without another word, Severus turned on his heel, letting the door slam behind him as he strode from the room.

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All things considered, Alecto's injuries were relatively mild. She'd been the victim of a Pustule Hex, along with a Rugburn Jinx that was clearly intended to make her sores as painful as possible. Uncomfortable, no doubt, though all the howling and thrashing around seemed a bit excessive. With the way she was behaving, one would've thought she'd endured the Cruciatus for hours on end.

"Poppy?" Severus called, wrinkling his nose in distaste. "Do you intend on dealing with this little... problem?"

"Your Death Eater friends are the least of my concerns," she responded, her icy voice emerging from behind a curtain at the other end of the ward. "If you want her healed, you'll just have to do it yourself."

"I really don't think..."

"Oh, sod off, Snape! That nasty little troll can go to the devil for all I care!"

Severus blinked, surprised by her vehemence. He opened his mouth to chastise her, then changed his mind, shaking his head as he withdrew his wand. He pointed it at Alecto with a murmur of, "*Medentur ulceribus*."

The sores began to heal, Alecto's expression gradually relaxing as she opened her eyes. She lifted her head to stare down at herself, inspecting her stubby arms and legs with a nod of satisfaction. Frankly, Severus could hardly tell the difference — even without the hex, her skin was pockmarked, her sallow flesh crisscrossed by numerous scars.

"Headmaster." She nodded at him as she heaved herself to her feet. But then she scowled, shooting a sharp look at the door.

"Where the bloody hell are they?"

"Who?" he inquired, cocking an eyebrow.

"Whoever did this to me! You just wait till I get my hands on them — I'll flay the skin right off their bones!"

"While I appreciate your enthusiasm, Alecto, the culprits have not yet been found. I will attend to that shortly."

"Yeah, well, be sure to send them my way."

He shook his head. "I intend to discipline them myself."

“You?” she said with a snort. “What are *you* going to do? Make the little buggers scrub cauldrons? Take away a few House Points?”

“Certainly not. I have a... special punishment in mind.” He paused, affecting his most sinister expression. “I do believe you’ll enjoy it.”

“Painful?”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

She hesitated, then shrugged. “Well, all right then. Night, Headmaster.”

After the door had closed behind her, Severus made his way to the other end of the ward. He pulled the curtain aside, sucking in a sharp breath as he did so.

The figure sprawled out on the bed was Michael Corner, though how Severus had recognized the boy, he couldn’t say. His face was battered and swollen, hideous bruises covering his chest and arms. He’d been the victim of a Whipping Curse, too, his skin slashed with at least a dozen bloody gashes. Several of his fingers lay in an unnatural position, a shard of bone protruding from his shin.

But the worst part was the twitching, low moans emerging from the boy’s throat as his body shuddered with tiny spasms. Sensing their building intensity, Severus shifted his attention to Poppy, who was leaning over the bed.

“Move back,” he muttered.

“What?” she said, shooting him an evil glare over her shoulder.

“I said, ‘move back’.”

“I will not! I’m trying to *help* this child!”

“That will be rather more difficult if you’re injured yourself.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you threatening me?”

Severus sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. Poppy might’ve been an experienced healer, but when it came to the effects of the Cruciatus, she was rather out of her depth. After all, it wasn’t as if Unforgivables had ever been a common problem at Hogwarts.

Well, until this year.

“Move back,” he repeated more harshly. “That boy is about to lose what little control he has left. You don’t want to be within striking distance.”

As if on cue, Corner began to thrash, his arms and unbroken leg flailing violently as his mouth opened in a scream. He nearly drove a fist into Poppy’s face, which was only avoided thanks to Severus’s quick reflexes. He grabbed her by the arm, jerking her out of the way.

“Now do you understand?” he said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

She didn’t seem to hear him, tears streaming down her cheeks as she stared down at the boy. To make matters worse, Corner was crying, too, drops of moisture leaking from eyes that were too swollen to open.

“What do I do?” Poppy whispered. “How do I make it stop?”

He shook his head. “You can’t. All you can do is wait for it to pass.”

“How long will that take?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, even as he thought about his own treatment. The potion he’d invented was the best remedy for the aftereffects of the Cruciatus, one that was desperately needed here. But that would mean taking one hell of a risk.

Recommending Blood Replenisher, potions to ward off a nasty infection? He could justify that to the Dark Lord, explaining that he hadn’t wanted to deal with the complication of a student’s death. But to go out of his way to relieve the boy’s *suffering*? There’d be no excuse for that, especially when dealing with a student who was so clearly opposed to the new regime.

No excuse, indeed... which was why Severus intended to make sure that the Dark Lord never found out about it.

“I’ll be back momentarily,” he said, giving the boy a cursory glance before he hurried from the room.

The next thing he knew, he was striding through his quarters, retrieving the potion and tucking it in his pocket. He poked his head in the bedroom to check on Lily, relieved to see that she’d fallen asleep. Clearly, their little outing had exhausted her — she didn’t even stir as he dropped a blanket over her with a flick of his wand.

“Here,” he said when he made it back to Poppy’s side. “Give him three drops whenever the spasms start to get bad.”

She gave him a suspicious look. “If this is something that will harm him...”

Severus shook his head, cursing under his breath. Traitor or not, when had he ever physically harmed a student? What would lead her to believe he intended to do so now?

“Mr. Corner can hardly take responsibility for his actions if he’s too delirious to understand what he did wrong,” he said coldly. “Now give him the potion. Give it to him now, unless you want me to do it.”

For a long moment, she glared at him. And then finally, she sighed, accepting the vial he pressed into her hand.

“Ready?”

“I suppose so.”

Nodding, Severus moved closer to the bed, pinning the boy’s thrashing arms to his sides. He waited for Poppy to administer the dosage before releasing his hold, taking a large step backward as he motioned for her to do the same.

“It isn’t helping,” she said, her voice barely audible above Corner’s anguished howls. “My god, it’s getting worse! Snape, what the bloody hell have you done?”

“Just give it a minute,” he said quietly. “It needs to work its way through his system.”

Suddenly, Corner's body went limp, a sob of relief escaping his throat as he lapsed into unconsciousness. He lay utterly still, not flinching in the slightest as Poppy repaired his mangled leg. Following that, she cleaned his wounds, sealing them off before spreading a pungent paste across his battered skin.

"If you were anyone else," she said, shooting a glance at Severus over her shoulder. "I'd thank you. But I can't forget that if it wasn't for you, this would've never happened in the first place."

He resisted the urge to flinch. "Your opinion of me is irrelevant."

"Perhaps, but I just don't understand why..."

"As for the boy," he interrupted, his voice cold. "I imagine he'll be fine in a couple days. Send him to my office as soon as he's released."

"Why?"

"That," he said, brushing an invisible speck of dust off his cloak. "Is none of your concern. Good night, Poppy."

With that, he left the Hospital Wing, drawing up a list of names as he made his way back to his office. Of course, he knew exactly who he wanted to summon, dashing off a message to Amycus to bring them to him as soon as possible. It was all of the usual culprits, mostly Gryffindors, who shuffled into his office just a few minutes later, dropping into the row of seats he'd provided for them.

"Thank you, Amycus. You may go."

"But..."

"*Out!* Go see about your sister."

"Fine," Amycus said ungraciously. "Night, Headmaster."

Closing the door with a flick of his wand, Severus paced in front of the students, his lip curling into a cold sneer.

"I won't waste time on useless explanations. If you truly don't know why you've been summoned, you'll be on your way soon enough. If you do, however..." He paused, allowing the unspoken threat to linger in the air. "If you do, we have a problem. Miss Weasley?"

The girl trembled as she stepped forward, but she met his stare for stare, never flinching as he pointed his wand between her eyes.

*"Legilimens."*

One by one, he examined the students, only to learn three important things. The first was that Michael Corner had indeed acted alone. He must've released the girl when no one else was around — Severus couldn't find so much as a scrap of memory to indicate otherwise.

The second? The person who'd hexed Alecto wasn't a student at all. True, Neville Longbottom had been present, but he'd been watching from the other end of the corridor, gasping in disbelief as Minerva McGonagall had thrown a couple of lightning quick nonverbals at her colleague.

Withdrawing from Longbottom's mind, Severus smirked. He would've loved to summon Minerva, to congratulate her on such a commendable achievement. But of course, he couldn't do that. On the contrary, he should be hoping like hell that this wasn't a sign of things to come. If the teachers were starting to rebel, that could only mean chaos. Worse, it would be infinitely harder to justify their actions to the Dark Lord.

The third thing he discovered was the most interesting of all. He'd seen a coin clutched in Longbottom's hand, one that had given every appearance of being an ordinary Galleon. But as he'd watched, he'd seen a message scrawl itself across the surface, realizing that the DA had its own methods of communication.

Good news? For the most part, yes. It allowed the students to look out for one another, even in situations where Severus couldn't find a way to intervene on their behalf. Indeed, he'd seen several examples of that just by skimming through the boy's most recent memories.

More than that, it gave him his own idea, one he cursed himself for not thinking of sooner.

"Dismissed," he said curtly.

Of course, the Carrows would hardly be satisfied with his findings. That was doubly true considering that he had no intention of revealing that Minerva had cast the hexes. But he had a plan, one that led to a long, frustrating search before he finally spotted a small shadow out of the corner of his eye.

"Follow me," he muttered to the cat, leading her to a deserted alcove. 'Winifred Willows,' he said once he'd cast a quick *Muffliato*. "Do you know who she is?"

The cat bobbed her head.

"I want you to find her. Once you do, I'll need you to lead me to her location."

Charity bounded off, only to return in a matter of minutes. She led Severus to the Potions classroom, of all places, casting a pointed look at a tiny storage closet at the back of the room. The girl's eyes widened when she saw him, her mouth opening in what was sure to be a piercing scream. But he was too quick for that, whipping his wand out and casting a Silencing Charm in one smooth motion.

"Miss Willows? I'll need you to come with me."

There was no denying the girl's terror, her entire body trembling as silent tears streamed down her cheeks. But she made no move to escape, trailing behind him as he strode over to the wall. Hesitating, he pushed the tiny silver button, hoping like hell that this plan of his wouldn't backfire as he ushered her into the passageway.

Really though, what else could he do? The Carrows had demanded a culprit. Indeed, they'd rip the school apart if he didn't give them one. And while he had no intention of turning this child over to them, she'd be instrumental in satisfying their thirst for vengeance.

When they reached his office, Severus was struck by another thought, as strange as it was appealing. This was a rare opportunity for him to show mercy without any fear of reprisal. After all, the girl wouldn't remember a single detail about this night once he'd finished with her.

"Have you eaten?" he said abruptly.



She stared up at him, obviously shocked. And then slowly, she shook her head, just as he remembered to lift the Silencing Charm.

“No, sir.”

“Very well.” He stalked over to his desk, tapping the surface with the tip of his wand. Immediately, a platter of sandwiches appeared, followed by a pitcher of pumpkin juice. “Eat.”

For a moment, the girl just stood there, looking as if she’d been hit by a Stunner. But then Severus heard her stomach growl, which seemed to bring her back to her senses. She hurried over to the desk, grabbing a sandwich and cramming it in her mouth.

*Children*, he thought, shaking his head in exasperation as she slurped at her pumpkin juice. Gluttonous little creatures, really. One could only hope that his own offspring would show a little more restraint.

“Are you finished?” he said a few minutes later.

Silently, she nodded, wiping her mouth on her sleeve as she watched him scrounge through his desk. It didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for. Withdrawing the list of addresses, he scrawled the necessary information on a blank piece of parchment before striding to the center of the room.

“Take my arm, Miss Willows.”

“What?” she blinked in confusion... something she’d be doing frequently in the days to come.

“My arm,” he repeated, his voice firm. “Now.”

The girl was from Cornwall, a sleepy little village right on the edge of the sea. Perfect, really — Severus didn’t imagine there’d be many Death Eaters lurking about. Nonetheless, he cast a quick succession of spells, the same charms he’d used earlier to shield Lily and himself from any threat of detection. And then finally, he turned to the girl, hating what he was about to do.

“Sir,” she said, her expression caught between bewilderment and terror. “Don’t hurt my family. Please. I know what I did was wrong, but...”

“*Obliviate*.”

Carefully, he erased her recent memories, replacing them with a handful of vague impressions. On some level, she’d be aware that she’d displeased the Carrows, that they’d attempted to punish her. Beyond that? Nothing.

But that wasn’t enough. Not quite.

“*Confundo*.”

He waited for her eyes to grow hazy, then said, “Who am I?”

“Headmaster Snape?”

He shook his head. “No. The headmaster is back at Hogwarts. Who am I?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Someone who works for the Order.”

“The Order,” she repeated, her pigtails bobbing as she gave a little nod.

“You don’t know my name?”

“No.”

“Who do I look like?”

She hesitated, her forehead wrinkling in concentration. “I don’t know, sir. It’s too dark to see your face.”

Satisfied, he nodded. “Go home, Miss Willows. Go home and tell your parents that you’re in grave danger. Tell them you mustn’t return to Hogwarts until the war is over, that you must remain in hiding. Tell them to cast the strongest wards they can manage, that none of you should leave this place until they know for certain it’s safe to do so. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” she said vaguely.

He nodded. “Good. Now go.”

Silently, he watched as she wandered up to the cottage door, hearing a timid knock just before a beam of light sliced across the darkened street. The shadow of a woman appeared in the doorway, a cry of surprise followed by several rapid fire questions. And then at last, the girl was swept up into the woman’s arms, the door shutting behind them with a dull thud.

With a weary sigh, he spun on his heel, Apparating back to Hogwarts.

The rest was easy. Sickening, yes, but easy.

Settling himself behind his desk, he modified his memories, creating images of a punishment that had been so brutal, so utterly devoid of mercy that Lord Voldemort himself would’ve been impressed. No, the girl wouldn’t be returning to Hogwarts that year. But as far as the Carrows were concerned, that was because it would take her months, perhaps even years, to recover from the trauma Severus had inflicted upon her.

Would that satisfy their need for vengeance? He sure as hell hoped so.

Yawning, he made his way over to the tapestry, slipping into the serene silence of his quarters. All he wanted to do was fall into bed, soothed by Lily’s comforting warmth as he drifted off to sleep. Instead, he headed for the study, withdrawing his wand as he retrieved a pair of coins from his pocket. He didn’t have any Galleons on him, only a handful of Sickles. Well, that wasn’t a bad thing, was it? Silver would be less conspicuous, certainly less likely to be stolen.

Placing the coins on the table, he waved his wand. Nothing happened.

Sighing, he scooped them into his hand, assuming that he was simply too tired to remember the charm correctly. But just as he made to shove them back in his pocket, he felt one of them grow warm.

Even as he watched, a familiar scrawl etched itself into the shiny surface, the very thought that had been running through his mind just a moment before.

*Just in case.*

Satisfied, he trudged to the bedroom, placing Lily's coin on the bedside table. Such a little thing, yet it made him feel more secure somehow, the tension melting from his body as he slid into bed beside her. Drawing her into his arms, he held her close, burying his face in her hair.

Yes, the days were growing darker. But there were bright spots, too, rising to meet the shadows as the darkness descended. As strange as it was, he couldn't even dwell on the evening's events — his silent fury at the Carrows, his underlying fear of the retaliation they might have been planning. He'd think about those things tomorrow, no doubt, obsessing over the events themselves and the possible implications.

But for now, they were held at bay, driven away by the sharp fragrance of evergreen that still lingered in Lily's hair. And then suddenly, all he could see was her standing on that mountain, her face alight with wonder as she'd gazed out over the horizon. That sense of hope, that quiet joy... those emotions had been hers rather than his, and yet they'd affected him deeply, making him feel... feel what? He didn't know. Something stronger than despair, far more powerful than the dismal reality that had been waiting for him back at Hogwarts.

It was as if he'd come to terms with some deeper truth, one that had eluded him all his life.

As if he'd finally understood what it felt like to be... *happy*.

## 74. A Secret Weapon

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### Chapter 74: A Secret Weapon

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Surprising, but it seemed the children had *some* measure of common sense.

Once the details of Michael Corner's torture became common knowledge, Severus had expected to have an open rebellion on his hands. Instead, Hogwarts was more peaceful than it had been in months, the students strangely subdued.

Too good to be true? Perhaps. But the respite was welcome nonetheless, a much-needed chance to rest and regroup.

Meanwhile, certain students had taken to disappearing for hours on end, though fortunately, the Carrows hardly seemed to notice. They didn't pick up on the smug expressions, the conspiratorial looks that passed between Longbottom and his friends. All they saw was an outward facade of obedience, assuming they'd finally brought their most rebellious students to heel.

Indeed, Severus had little reason to complain. True, the Dark Lord was more impatient than ever, but he was practicing a new level of restraint, obviously sensing that the end was near at hand. His sense of self-preservation still reigned supreme over his madness, reminding him that he'd need all the forces he could muster to stand at his side. He wouldn't risk putting any of his fighters out of commission, particularly those in the higher ranks.

As for Severus, he couldn't remember the last time Voldemort had approached him with such careful courtesy. There were no curses flung in his direction now, no harsh words or chastisements. On the contrary, he received nothing but praise, an obvious attempt to ensure his loyalty.

Of course, it made little difference. Whether he was treated like a king or tortured within an inch of his life, he'd proceed as planned. But he was grateful to have a couple months of relative peace, February passing without incident, along with most of March.

March 21 dawned bright and clear, the breeze unusually mild as it drifted in through the open window. Severus glanced at the clock with a softly muttered curse, reaching for his trousers before remembering it was a Saturday. Sighing in relief, he picked up his wand instead, tapping the bedside table to order up some coffee as he relaxed against the pillows.

"Mmm..."

With that, he turned his attention to the woman lying beside him, instantly mesmerized by her loveliness. She was curled up on her side, copper hair surrounding her head like a tangled halo, her expression serene. His eyes swept downward, widening ever so slightly as he realized she'd pushed the covers off, her body gloriously naked beneath the morning sunlight.

Unable to help himself, he stared at her breasts, admiring their newfound fullness before his eyes dropped to her stomach.

How had it happened? One day, it had been as flat as his own. The next? Her pregnancy had been unmistakable. She'd started showing about a month ago, beaming with satisfaction as she'd opened her robe to show him the gentle swell.

Now she was four months along, with a definite roundness to her stomach that never ceased to fascinate him. For what seemed like the hundredth time, he reached out to touch it, his palm sliding across her warm, smooth skin. It felt different than he'd imagined it would, dense and firm like a ripening fruit, never quite the same from one day to the next.

Yes, there was no denying that she was pregnant, her body changing right before his eyes. But the idea that there was a *person* growing in there, a tiny being he'd helped create? He still had trouble wrapping his head around that one.

Lily opened her eyes, glancing down at his hand as her lips curved into a smile. "Morning."

"My apologies," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to wake you."

In response, she moved closer, the swell of her belly meeting the flat contours of his own. "I don't mind."

With that, she kissed his neck, her warm breath tickling his ear as she draped a leg over his waist. And then he found himself in a tortured sort of bliss, his hardness trapped against her delicious heat, her hips undulating against his. He could've taken control easily enough — a quick shift and he could've buried himself inside her. But he decided to let her take the lead, enjoying her boldness as she pushed him onto his back.

"Touch me," she said, her voice softly commanding as she surrounded him with a curtain of brilliant red hair.

Indeed, her pregnancy had changed things between them, right down to the way they made love. Her breasts were fuller, heavier in his hands, increased sensitivity making her shudder as his thumbs glided across her nipples. At first, he'd dreaded her changing appearance, the distortion of a figure that couldn't have possibly been improved. Only when he'd seen those changes for himself had he realized that it wasn't a different body at all, just an enhanced version of the one he already adored.

And why was it changing? Because of him. That was the most appealing part of all, the ever present knowledge that it was *his* child her body was shifting to accommodate. The physical evidence affected him in ways he could've never anticipated, a flurry of emotions ranging from gentle, almost reverent, to something fiercely primal, crude in its naked longing.

It was the latter that took hold of him as she leaned forward, whimpering low in her throat as he drew her nipple into his mouth. He sucked it gently, his hands sliding down, palms cradling the swell of her stomach. This was the touch that had aroused her so much in the first place, though he knew it wasn't the physical sensation that had such a deep effect on her. It was something he felt, too, an unspoken connection that was impossible to describe.

Whatever it was, she responded beautifully, bracing one hand on his chest as she reached down to guide him inside her. Her eyes fluttered closed, her breath emerging as a soft moan

as her hips began to move, slow and sensuous.

Change wasn't necessarily a bad thing, he decided, his own sounds of pleasure mingled with hers as she made love to him with an intensity that caught him by surprise. She fell apart not just once, but twice, a whisper of his name prompting his own release as she collapsed on his chest.

In the aftermath, he held her close, only loosening his grip when it occurred to him that he might be hurting her. And this was another change he hadn't anticipated — these odd rushes of tenderness, love mingled with anxiety, an overwhelming urge to keep her in his arms and shield her from the world forever.

Of course, he'd always been protective of Lily. Maddeningly so. But these days, it was more like an obsession, one that brought him back to their quarters several times a day to check on her. It didn't matter that he knew exactly where she was... that she was perfectly safe... that he'd see her again in a matter of hours. Logical or not, being apart from her wasn't just unpleasant anymore. It was almost unbearable.

Despite these feelings, or perhaps because of them, he'd started to wonder if he should send her away. The thought had first occurred to him a few weeks before, the night she'd opened her robe for him. He'd lain awake until dawn with his hand pressed against that little swell, overwhelmed by the urge to take her away somewhere, as far from the coming conflict as possible. A tropical island, perhaps, or a tiny cabin hidden in the mountains?

He'd come back to his senses, of course, remembering his other obligations. But that hadn't stopped him from thinking about safe houses, wondering if he should allow the Order to smuggle her into hiding. That would get her away from Hogwarts, wouldn't it? Yes, and the Order could supply her with everything she needed — food, companionship, protection. She'd even have access to medical care should the need arise.

But that would also mean alerting other people to her existence, a concept he railed against with every fiber of his being. He could never forget what had happened the last time he'd trusted her care to someone else, those long months of fear followed by years of bitter remorse. Lily... her broken body sprawled across the floor, dull green eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. That had been the price of their separation, an estrangement that had rendered him powerless to protect her. If there was even the slightest risk of that happening again...

Shuddering, he tightened his hold on her, relieved when she didn't protest. He closed his eyes, concentrating on her breathing, the rhythm of her strong, steady heartbeat against his chest. And then gradually, he relaxed, allowing the reality of her presence to drive the demons away.

"Oh!"

"Hmm?"

"I thought I felt a flutter."

In response, he sat up, waiting until she'd rolled onto her back before sliding a hand down to rest on her stomach.

"Not there," she said, taking his fingers and sliding them over a few inches. "Here."

He closed his eyes, concentrating hard for several minutes. Finally, he shook his head, letting out a heavy sigh.

"It's all right," she told him, shrugging as she sat up. "It's early yet."

He nodded, knowing she was right. He'd skimmed through several pregnancy books since learning of her condition, all of which had said that significant movement generally didn't start until the fifth month. Just a few more weeks, yet he couldn't help feeling impatient, knowing he was living on borrowed time.

"Was this the first time you felt it?" he asked, leaning over to retrieve his trousers.

She shook her head. "It's been off and on all week, mostly during the day when you were at work."

"Mostly?"

"Well, I felt a few flutters last night."

"You didn't tell me."

She shrugged. "You were sleeping."

"Next time," he said, pausing to button his frock coat. "Wake me up. *Accio* boots."

Catching them with one hand, he headed over to the bedside table, muttering a Warming Charm before pouring himself a cup of coffee. He downed it in several large swallows, pausing for a quick kiss as he sat down to lace up his boots.

"You have to go," Lily said quietly. "Don't you?"

"I've got a load of paperwork to manage, not to mention three detentions to supervise this afternoon. I'll return as soon as I can though, hopefully before nightfall. Is there anything I can bring you?"

"Bertie Bott's."

"You want... jellybeans?"

"Only the spinach flavored ones."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to bring you spinach?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "It would certainly be healthier."

She shook her head. "That wouldn't be the same."

"Logic would suggest that..."

But then he trailed off, reminding himself that there was no logic when it came to her cravings. He'd learned that the hard way, following a prolonged debate on the virtues of baked versus roasted chicken. He'd insisted they tasted the same, inadvertently making her cry through his attempts to understand why she was willing to eat one but not the other. And then there was the broccoli, a vegetable she would only eat now if she dipped it in pudding first. *Vanilla* pudding, to be more precise, a preference that had required an extra trip to the kitchens at 3 AM.

“Very well,” he said, reaching up to fasten his robe. “Though how am I supposed to know which ones are spinach? If I recall correctly, that shade of green is shared with other flavors I doubt you’d enjoy. Fungus, for example. Or grass.”

“Grass,” she said, her expression thoughtful. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“If you say so.”

He had a feeling his evening would be spent sorting through jellybeans, subjected to rather unpleasant trial and error in his attempts to find the flavor she wanted. But then she rose to kiss him goodbye, wrapping her arms around his neck as she flashed him a brilliant smile.

“I love you.”

Well, perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad.

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A couple nights later, Severus was working in his office, finishing up a final bit of correspondence.

*Sincerely*, he wrote. *Severus Snape*

He paused to dip his quill in the inkpot, his eyes flicking to the tapestry. It had been one of those days that seemed as if it would never end, leaving him longing for the peace and quiet of his quarters, the comfort of Lily’s welcoming smile.

With a newfound burst of energy, he began to write again.

*Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wiz...*

“Fuck!”

He slammed the quill down, spraying ink across several sheets of parchment as he shot a poisonous glare at his forearm. Bastard. He always had the worst possible timing, as if he could sense it when his followers would’ve given anything not to be disturbed. A couple weeks before, he’d even summoned Severus during an intimate moment, intense pleasure at war with ever increasing pain, a howl of ecstasy mingled with anguish echoing off the walls of his darkened bedroom.

Yes, he’d managed to finish, knowing it was the wisest thing to do. No sense in appearing before the Dark Lord when he was restless and muddled, still aching for the release he’d been denied.

Of course, it wasn’t so simple this time. No, not when the relief he craved was a peaceful evening with Lily, followed by several hours of rest. But he drew on that lesson nonetheless, swallowing his anger, replacing it with a curious sense of calm.

“Summons?”

He jerked his head at the portrait.

“Be careful.”



“As if,” he said, withdrawing a few memories and placing them in the Pensieve, “there were any other option.”

Rising from his chair, he strode to the center of the office, pressing his fingers to the Dark Mark. Expecting a wild array of lights and colors, he was surprised when the world righted itself almost instantly. Malfoy Manor? No, he was standing outside the gates of Hogwarts, staring at the castle in bewilderment. What...

“Good evening, Severus.”

His heart stopped. His blood froze. His breath rushed out of his lungs, coming out in a whoosh like he’d just been punched in the stomach. And yet he maintained his composure somehow, turning to greet the Dark Lord with the most neutral expression he could manage.

“My lord,” he said, inclining his head. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

“Indeed?”

“Indeed,” he repeated, his voice firm. “It’s your school, after all. It seems only right that you should visit.”

“My school,” Voldemort said thoughtfully. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

Bloody fucking hell. Why was he here? What did he want? Why tonight, of all nights? And what if...

“Open the gates, Severus. Walk with me.”

“Of course, my lord.”

For a while, they didn’t speak, a pair of shadows gliding silently across the lawn. And then finally, Voldemort paused, his voice a low pitched hiss that slithered through the darkness. “Harry Potter was captured today.”

Severus stumbled, taking a second to regain his footing. Fortunately, his companion didn’t seem to notice.

“Captured, yes, and do you know what happened?”

“No,” he said, cringing as the word came out as a feeble croak.

“He eluded me. Again.”

With that, Severus remembered how to breathe. “That’s most unfortunate, my lord.”

“Indeed. But no matter, Severus. No matter. Oh, I won’t deny that this ineptitude strains my patience. But even I must admit that it’s likely for the best. When I do find him, I’ll be ready. More ready than you can possibly imagine.”

“My lord?”

But Voldemort was looking past him now, a strange flicker in his eyes as he gazed off toward the lake. “I shall join you in the castle shortly,” he said, his voice colder than the chilly March air. “Leave me now.”

Severus bowed, realizing he had no choice but to obey. Careful to avoid any sense of urgency, he made his way back up the path, entering the castle as if he'd just been out for a leisurely nighttime stroll. But as soon as the door closed behind him, he was running, racing through the halls and pounding up the stairs.

"Headmaster? Something wrong?"

"Amycus," he said, trying not to pant too hard as he stopped dead in his tracks. "Our master is here to visit. Make sure all is ready for him."

There, that was a suitable excuse. If anyone happened to mention his frantic behavior, he could always chalk it up to a desire to give their honored guest a proper welcome. Yes, the Dark Lord would enjoy the idea of him scrambling around in an effort to make a good impression. Indeed, he'd expect it.

Honestly, Severus didn't give a damn if the school was in order. All he cared about was reaching his quarters, wild with panic as he shoved the tapestry aside. Bursting through the door, he ran down the hallway, glancing into the empty study before he headed for the bedroom.

"Lily? Lily, wake up! Damn it, wake up!"

She came back to consciousness with a gasp, staring up at him through wide, frightened eyes.

"Severus, what..."

"Get dressed. Grab your things. I want you to go to the Room of Requirement. Stay there until... until I send you further instructions."

To his relief, she didn't hesitate, hopping out of bed and heading for the wardrobe. She turned to him with her dress half unbuttoned, her expression bewildered. "Can you at least tell me..."

"The Dark Lord is here."

Her face went white. "Shit."

"Indeed," he said, gathering her dinner leftovers and shoving them in a sack. "We have no time to lose."

"But he can't find me in here, can he? I thought no one could enter without your permission."

"My permission, yes. Tell me: what shall I say if he asks to see my private rooms?"

She frowned, reaching for her cloak. "Well, I guess you'd have to allow it. But why would he be interested in seeing where you sleep?"

"Where Dumbledore slept."

"Oh," she said quietly. "But what about the passages? I could just..."

He shook his head, grabbing the cloak from her limp hands. He draped it over her shoulders, crossing the room to retrieve something from the bedside table. "Not secure. If he

does come in here, that's the first thing he'll be looking for. Unrevealed secrets. Hidden passages. That's how his mind works, Lily. Come."

Taking her hand, he headed for the front door, pausing to mash the tiny button. Together, they ducked into the passageway, his hand resting firmly on the small of her back as he guided her toward the dead end.

"Now," he said as they finally came to a stop. "You must ask for a room that he cannot access. Be specific, Lily. Will you do that?"

"What about you?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Even better if I know for a fact that you will not come out until it's safe to do so."

"How will I know?"

Withdrawing the coin from his pocket, he pressed it into her hand, gripping his own as he willed a message to appear.

*Stay in the room. Promise me.*

She glanced down, watching as the words etched themselves across the shiny surface. "All right."

"Take the food, too. Duplicate it if you must. There's no telling how long he might be here."

"What do you think he wants?"

Severus paused, letting out a heavy sigh. "I don't know, Lily. I really don't know."

With that, he pulled her to him, his mouth pressing hard against hers. And then he released her, gesturing at the wall with a shaking hand.

"Go."

He stayed long enough to watch her disappear, and then it was back through the passage, tearing through their quarters like a madman as he gathered her possessions. Of course, none of the items were as incriminating as Lily herself would've been, but it still wouldn't do to let Voldemort believe he had a woman sleeping in his quarters.

But what to do with her clothes, her books, the collection of beauty products in the bathroom? What about her perfume, her hairbrush, those silly little trinkets she'd transfigured to set on the bookcase?

And then it came to him, calm logic rising to triumph over his initial panic. He shrank everything down, striding over to the bookshelf and grabbing the thickest book he could find. *The Complete Encyclopedia of Kneazle Care*? No, the Dark Lord wouldn't give a toss about that. Using his wand to cut through the pages, he made a good sized hollow, large enough to hold the miniature possessions. A good sealing charm and he was satisfied, taking a deep breath as he headed back out to his office.

"Severus?" the portrait called, brow furrowed with concern. "What's going on?"

“An old friend of yours has come to visit. He’ll be arriving any minute.”

“Lord Voldemort?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.” Oddly, Dumbledore didn’t seem the least bit surprised. “Well, I suppose we must be ready for him.”

With that, he let his chin sink into his beard, affecting a soft snore.

Severus didn’t have to wait long. Just a few minutes later, there was a sharp rap on the door. Checking to make sure the Pensieve was safely concealed, he rose to his feet, his expression stoic as he crossed the room.

“My lord,” he said, pushing the door open. “Please, come in.”

But Voldemort wasn’t looking at him. No, his eyes were fixed on the portrait behind the desk, his expression intrigued.

“Has it woken up yet?”

“I’m afraid not, my lord.”

“Pity. I’m sure you’d enjoy the opportunity to boast about your triumph.”

Severus nodded, realizing all over again that Voldemort didn’t understand the first thing about him.

“You know, Severus,” he said, stepping closer to the portrait. “That continues to be one of my fondest memories. Albus Dumbledore on his knees, pleading for mercy... a glorious triumph indeed. You’ll have to show it to me again sometime.”

“Whenever you wish, my lord.”

Voldemort’s expression was peculiar, caught somewhere between self-satisfaction and deep resentment. He pulled his wand from his sleeve, pointing it directly at the portrait.

“My only regret,” he said softly, “is that I never had the chance to accomplish such a thing myself. *Crucio*.”

A jet of red light shot out from his wand, though it did no harm to the portrait. It ricocheted off the surface instead, bouncing from one portrait to another, increasing in both strength and brightness as it made its way around the room. And then at last, it returned to its owner, hitting him right between the eyes.

Voldemort screamed, dropping to his knees as his body started to spasm. The light seemed to go on forever, yet not nearly long enough, leaving him writhing on the floor in the aftermath. He didn’t stop screaming, pain mingled with uncontrollable fury. And then finally, he regained his composure, his evil glare sweeping across the portraits before coming to rest on Dumbledore.

“My lord!” Severus said, affecting a tone of concern. “Are you all right?”

Ignoring him, Voldemort pushed himself to his feet, gliding over to the portrait again. And then he did a curious thing. He smiled.

"I conquered you once," he told the portrait. "Yes, and I'll do so again. That secret weapon... did you really believe that the truth would die with you? I'm afraid you were sadly mistaken. I've got it now. Oh yes, and I intend to use it."

Secret weapon? What the bloody hell...

"Severus!" Voldemort snapped.

"Yes, my lord?"

"I wish to take a tour of the school."

"Of course. Allow me to escort you."

Voldemort shook his head, slipping his wand back in his sleeve. "That won't be necessary."

"It's no trouble, my lord. I'd be honored to..."

"No. I prefer to go alone."

Severus watched in helpless frustration as Voldemort swept from the room, resisting the urge to trail in his wake. Why was he here? Where was he planning to go? What about the students? Granted, it was past curfew, but that was no guarantee. For all he knew, a few might be wandering the halls, intent on causing mischief. If Voldemort himself caught a student decorating the walls with graffiti, or placing flyers in strategic locations...

Shuddering, Severus pushed the gruesome image away.

And what about the Room of Requirement? That was what terrified him the most, leaving him gripping the edge of his desk with white knuckled fingers. Of course, he trusted Lily. She would've been clever enough to request a room that the Dark Lord couldn't access. But what if he attempted to enter the Room of Hidden Things? Could the Room serve multiple purposes at once?

Pushing away from his desk, Severus paced the floor for several minutes before recalling something he'd nearly forgotten.

*Lily*, he thought, focusing all his attention on the coin as he withdrew it from his pocket. *Are you all right?*

There was an endless pause, panic rising in his throat as he waited for her to respond. And then finally, the coin grew warm, its smooth surface filling with her neat script.

*Fine. Sleeping.*

He shook his head, exasperation mingled with relief. Here he was, nearly losing his mind, while she was having a cozy little nap.

*Good*, he replied. *Stay where you are.*

*I know.*

There was another long pause, to the point where he thought she'd fallen asleep again. And then at last, she followed up with another message.

*What's happening?*

*He's taking a tour of the school.*

In response, he received a single word: *Horcrux*.

Yes, that was his biggest fear. After they'd destroyed the diadem, he'd had the presence of mind to create a replica. It wouldn't fool the Dark Lord for long... but he'd also have to be in close proximity to tell the difference.

At first, Severus had placed it back on the statue. But then he'd changed his mind, stashing it in a corner beneath a pile of old, dusty bedding instead. Who knew? It might buy them precious time.

*Don't worry, he told Lily. Go back to sleep.*

Why not? There was nothing to do but wait now. Wait, while hoping like hell that Voldemort wouldn't discover the truth. The truth about Lily... the truth about his bloody Horcrux. Either would be a disaster, the first for obvious reasons. The second? Severus wouldn't necessarily be blamed for the Horcrux's destruction, especially if Voldemort believed it had happened during Dumbledore's tenure. But it would certainly trigger his paranoia, which could cost them the entire war.

Had it been a mistake to get rid of the thing? At the time, it had seemed like the most obvious course of action — one less Horcrux, the closer they'd be to that final defeat. But he hadn't counted on the boy taking so long to destroy the others.

Harry. Yes, that was another cause for concern. Again, he'd been captured. Again, he'd managed to escape. But under what circumstances? Had he been injured? What about his companions? Had there been any casualties? Severus closed his eyes, hoping Hermione Granger hadn't met with some unfortunate fate. He was no fool — he knew that Harry would've never made it this far without her assistance. Simply put, he needed her.

Perhaps they all did.

Beyond that, there was the matter of the secret weapon. What did that mean? Something of Dumbledore's that Voldemort had taken, obviously, but what...

His head jerked up, his breath catching in his throat as he heard a shuffling sound at the door.

"Enter!"

Alecto waddled into the room, her eyes sharp and predatory as they met his.

"Headmaster," she said, looking far more satisfied than he would've preferred. "The Dark Lord wishes to see you."

He rose to his feet, a cold knot of fear forming in the pit of his stomach.

"Very well," he said calmly. "Take me to him."

## 75. Logic Versus Love

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### Chapter 75: Logic Versus Love

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Lily crawled out of her hammock, clutching the coin tightly as she paced the room.

Voldemort at Hogwarts. The idea still seemed alien somehow, as if the castle should've rejected him outright. Hogwarts was supposed to be a place of safety, immune to the dangers of the outside world. Or at least, that was how she'd seen it as a girl, believing it would always be there to shelter her.

Of course, she knew better now. How many tragedies had happened here over the years? How many lives had been lost? She could no longer cling to any illusions of security, couldn't fool herself into believing everything would be all right. That wouldn't change the fact that Lord Fucking Voldemort was in the castle at this very moment, that he'd come here to...

Why *was* he here? Merely to inspect the school, to make sure he approved of the way Severus was running things? Or had he come to check up on his Horcrux?

That thought was terrifying, leaving her lightheaded as she braced herself against the wall. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, waiting for the episode to pass.

What would he do if he couldn't find it... or spent hours tearing the room apart, only to come up with the replica instead? What about the room itself? Could he even enter if she was already in here?

Sighing heavily, Lily dropped into the hammock, feeling a faint flutter as she curled up on her side. She wrapped her arms around her stomach, thankful that *this* child was safe, nestled deep inside her where she still had the power to protect it. But what about her other child? Where was he tonight?

Her *children*. She was still getting used to that concept, the idea that Harry would have a little brother or sister in just a few short months. Would he be there to meet his new sibling? Still in hiding, perhaps, caught up in his desperate hunt for Horcruxes? Or would the war be over by then, ending with a sacrifice that was too horrific to imagine?

For the most part, she still rejected the idea that Harry might die. But she'd also spent months searching for a solution, only to realize that all her efforts had been in vain. It was a struggle to remain optimistic, to push back against those silent fears that grew more persistent by the day. What if she *did* lose him? What if she never got the chance to tell him how much she loved him, or even that she'd been alive all this time? Would she have the strength to bear it?

Well, there was no point in asking that last question. There'd be another child to consider, after all, one who'd be wholly dependent on her for survival. Giving up wouldn't be an option, even if she had nothing else to live for. That was the promise she'd made when she'd

chosen to go through with this pregnancy, a vow she had every intention of honoring no matter how much it cost her to do so.

Sniffling, Lily reached up to wipe her eyes, struggling to focus on more cheerful topics. Impossible. How could she help imagining the worst when she was locked away in this deathly silent room, her entire future dependent on a madman's whim?

If only she had something to keep her busy, a way to pass the time until she received another message from Severus. But what if *that* didn't happen? What if she was doomed to sit here for hours, even days, clutching a coin that would never grow warm again? What if...

Sighing in frustration, she lifted her head to address the room. "I need something to distract me."

From out of nowhere, a table appeared, piled high with books, magazines, and games. It was an impressive collection, to say the least, though she knew it wouldn't do her any good. How could she lie around reading the latest issue of *Witch Weekly* with Voldemort himself roaming around the castle?

"Okay," she said quietly. "Let's try again. I need something that will distract me no matter how worried I might be. Something to make me feel better."

Abruptly, all the objects disappeared, replaced by a single book.

*Charms for the Expectant Witch*

Without warning, the book flipped open to the middle, displaying a chapter title embossed in brilliant gold letters.

*Determine Your Baby's Gender: A Simple Charm*

She'd never learned this particular charm, having refused to do so when she'd been pregnant with Harry. Foolish, but it had seemed like cheating somehow, as if she could only rightfully earn that knowledge through the act of giving birth. She hadn't wanted to spoil it, for the same reason she'd learned not to peek at her holiday gifts. Why ruin the excitement?

Of course, Christmas morning and labor had proven to be *very* different things. When those contractions had hit her fast and hard, she'd forgotten all about surprises. All she remembered was mindless desperation, an overwhelming need to put an end to the worst pain she'd ever experienced.

"A boy! Lily, it's a boy!"

Those words had barely registered, though James had practically shouted them in her ear. She'd been too busy making sure her baby was safe and healthy, exhaustion mingled with triumph as she'd cradled him in her arms. Only then had she understood the truth about giving birth. There'd been no thought to it, only instinct — a primal, unrelenting urge to deliver a healthy child. That had been the real miracle, the ultimate reward for all her suffering. Had it really *mattered* what gender that child happened to be?

Shaking her head, Lily returned her attention to the book.

*While some witches enjoy an element of mystery, there's nothing wrong with determining your baby's gender ahead of time. On the contrary, many expectant mothers prefer to know as*



*soon as possible, as it allows them to establish an identity for their unborn child. Furthermore, there are practical considerations, such as appropriate names, clothing, decor...*

Well, that was a valid point. As much as she'd enjoyed her first pregnancy, she'd gotten tired of referring to Harry as "the baby", or simply as "it". Did she really want to wait another five months before applying a proper pronoun to *this* child? Why should she have to? Why, when she knew that bringing it into the world would be just as meaningful either way?

*It.*

Suddenly, she hated that word, despised any suggestion of the unknown. She didn't know where Harry was or whether he was safe, nor why Voldemort had come to Hogwarts. She couldn't imagine when the war would end or what the outcome would be, who might live and who might die. Would Severus even be alive to see his child born? What about Harry? How would he feel about his new sibling? How would he feel about *her*? Would she ever have the chance to find out?

And what *about* her? What if *she* was the one who didn't survive? What if she went to her grave without ever knowing the first thing about her child? Death in childbirth was always possible, but hell, it was more likely that she wouldn't even make it to that point. She could be killed next month... next week...

She could die *tonight*, for all she knew, her baby's life terminated along with her own. A child who'd never have the chance to open its eyes, to take its first breath, to know that it...

It, it, it. The word ran as an endless loop through Lily's mind, louder and more insistent with each repetition. IT, IT, IT.

And then suddenly, that repetition was the sound of her own weeping, soft, gasping sobs that echoed off the walls as she clutched the book more tightly. She'd never felt so helpless, utterly at a loss to control or even predict her own future. If she died, she'd hardly have any choice in the matter. If she lost Harry, if she lost Severus or their unborn child, there'd be nothing she could do to bring them back. The only thing she *truly* had was the here and now, this one decision that still rested entirely in her hands.

If the worst should happen — *the very worst* — she'd never know who this child had been. It wouldn't have a face or a name, no clear identity to speak of. She'd never get to see if it had red hair or black, eyes of coal or forest green. No, and she'd never find out which talents it might've inherited from her, what gifts would've been passed down from Severus, or...

Shaking her head, she swiped at her eyes, her hand trembling as she turned the page.

*This charm can be cast at six weeks, though there might be a slight margin of error. The reader is advised to wait until at least the 12th week if she prefers the results to be foolproof.*

Yes, there were many things she didn't know. Things she might *never* know if the worst should happen. That was the secret fear, the silent terror she'd been holding at bay since the moment she'd realized she was pregnant. She'd hidden it so well, in fact, suppressing it with stubbornness, optimism, and blind determination, that she'd hardly been aware of it at all. But the room had seen her clearly, had penetrated her defenses to get straight to the heart of her distress.

Of course, casting the charm wouldn't make those feelings go away. No, not entirely. But it still gave her the ability to predict the future in some small way, a taste of absolute certainty in a world full of unknowns. She was 17 weeks pregnant now, on the verge of entering her fifth month. This charm was the one thing that couldn't possibly fail her, a chance to restore the confidence that had been slowly draining away ever since she'd entered the room.

In the end, it wasn't a conscious choice. No, it was instinct that prompted her to unfasten her robe, the tip of her wand tracing an intricate pattern across her skin.

*"Puer vel puella."*

She stared down at herself, hands sliding restlessly over her rounded stomach. For a moment, she thought the charm had failed, that she'd misread the directions somehow. But then there was a slight tingle, a sudden warmth beneath her fingertips. She snatched them away, her heart pounding as the pattern she'd drawn became visible, slender vines of light in a distinct shade of...

Silver.

"Oh..."

Her eyes filled with tears as she watched the light fade, albeit for a very different reason. And just like that, her fears faded to nothing, replaced by a surge of hope. It washed over her like summer rain, a cleansing warmth that stole her breath away as her baby shifted inside her. No mere flutter this time, but something stronger, a sensation she could feel from the outside. She pressed her hand against the curve of her belly, laughing aloud as a succession of tiny nudges danced across the surface of her palm.

She'd never know how much longer she waited, losing all track of time as she speculated over possible names. No, and she wouldn't remember her eyelids growing heavy, nor how the coin had ended up nestled between her breasts.

All she'd recall was the moment she'd woken up, coaxed back to consciousness by a soothing warmth against her skin.

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*You may come out now.*

Severus held his breath, releasing it as a shuddering sigh as he felt Lily respond.

*He's gone?*

Yes, he replied. *Return to our quarters — I'll join you shortly.*

Tucking the coin back in his pocket, he cast a final glance over his shoulder as the gate closed behind him. There were no looming shadows now, no high, cold voice slicing through the darkness. Nonetheless, he still felt ill at ease, clutching his wand reflexively as he made his way back up to the castle.

*"The Dark Lord wishes to see you."*

When Alecko had uttered those words, it had taken all the willpower he possessed to remain stoic, his mind working frantically as she'd led him through the halls. He'd been

convinced she was taking him to the seventh floor, that the Dark Lord had discovered the truth about his Horcrux.

Or worse, that he'd uncovered the truth about Lily.

A cold drop of sweat slithered down Severus's spine, leaving him shivering in the chilly March air. He cast a warming charm over the folds of his cloak, deciding to remain outside for a few more minutes. As much as he longed to see Lily, to feel her reassuring warmth as he held her close against his heart, he couldn't bear for her to see how shaken he was.

"Where is our lord?" he'd barked at Alecto when she'd taken a turn he didn't expect.

"Dungeons."

"Oh?"

She'd jerked her head, her expression smug.

Really, he should've known what was coming. Pathetic in its predictability, certainly no cause for alarm. The Carrows had lodged another complaint against him, claiming as they always did that he was too merciful. A useless endeavor, though naturally, they were too stupid to realize it. As usual, they hoped to outmaneuver him, underestimating his innate understanding of the Dark Lord's moods.

"Let the boy off with a warning," Alecto shrieked. "A bloody warning!"

He'd hesitated, brushing an invisible speck of dust off his sleeve. "You're speaking of Mr. Rivers, yes?"

"Right. Nasty little bugger."

Turning to Voldemort, he'd affected a bland expression. "My lord, I'll admit that the boy is a bit... unruly. However, there is one factor Alecto fails to take into account."

"And that would be?"

"Who his father is. Rhys Rivers works for the Ministry — The Department of International Magical Cooperation, to be exact. As it happens, he's also never been Imperiused. He continues to work on his own merits, which suggests he might be sympathetic to our cause. Do we truly wish to alienate a potential ally over a handful of childish pranks?"

"Yes," Voldemort said, his voice thoughtful. "We will need all our allies in the days to come."

"What about that little Ravenclaw chit?" Amycus interjected. "The one who set my hair on fire?"

"Ah," Severus said with a chuckle. "Yes."

"Wouldn't even let me have the satisfaction of punishing the brat!"

"Indeed not. The question is: do you know why? I imagine our lord does."

"You didn't deserve the privilege, Amycus," Voldemort said, caressing his wand with long, slender fingers. "If you allowed a student to get the upper hand, the fault lies with you."

Severus nodded. “Nonetheless, my lord, she was properly punished. I saw to it personally.”

“Show me.”

Patiently, Severus had endured the Dark Lord’s invasion, his private thoughts tucked safely behind his shields. Locating the falsified memory, he’d pushed it forward, sensing Voldemort’s growing approval as the scene unfolded. It was an image of Severus scorching the girl with a nasty burning hex, his lips twitching in response to her agonized screams.

“Very appropriate.” Voldemort murmured as he withdrew. And then to the Carrows, he’d said, “You’re wasting my time with these petty complaints. I will not allow you to do so again.”

“But my lord...”

“*Silence*, Alecto! This is precisely why I chose *Severus* to be my headmaster, where the two of you were never considered. His methods are subtle, nuanced, always prioritizing what is best for our cause. He doesn’t allow his temper to get the better of him, nor would he risk alienating valuable allies through random acts of vengeance.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Severus said, dipping his head in a respectful bow. “I only seek to honor you with my service.”

“And you do, Severus. You do. I trust you will continue to do so?”

“Of course.”

Voldemort nodded. “Very well. This subject is closed.”

The Carrows hadn’t bothered to hide their reaction, glaring at Severus with murder in their eyes. He’d responded with a smirk, pleased by what he’d managed to accomplish. He’d still need to allow their despicable punishments to some degree, simply to avoid arousing suspicion. But he could breathe a little easier, knowing his actions wouldn’t be scrutinized so closely in the future.

Of course, he wasn’t breathing easy now. No, he was panting harshly, finally surrendering to the panic he’d been concealing for hours. It didn’t matter that all was well now, at least for the time being. He’d come too close to disaster, unable to forget what might’ve happened if the Dark Lord had chosen to visit the Room of Requirement.

He’d been lulled into a false sense of security, believing that nothing could touch them here. That had been easy when the war was happening elsewhere, when Voldemort was hundreds of miles away at Malfoy Manor. But to realize he could be on their doorstep in a matter of seconds, that even the Room of Requirement might not be enough to keep Lily safe?

And that wasn’t all.

Deep down, Severus knew the final confrontation was close at hand. He couldn’t say how — just a feeling, an instinct, a sense of impending doom that grew deeper by the day. Whatever it was, the need to prepare had suddenly become urgent.

He didn’t even realize he’d entered the castle until he found himself in his office, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore’s portrait. Yes, there was this secret weapon business, too. He knew he

should wake the old man up, interrogate him all night if that was what it took. But he didn't have it in him to face another confrontation, especially when he knew how this one would go. Dumbledore would be evasive, no doubt, nattering on about putting his eggs in one basket or some such nonsense. And in the end, would he yield any answers?

Shaking his head, Severus trudged over to the tapestry. Tomorrow, he'd face the world again, setting his fears aside as he prepared for the inevitable end. Tonight, he only wanted comfort, as much as it pained him to admit it. He needed to see Lily, touch her, reassure himself with his own five senses that it wasn't too late to do so.

He didn't have to wait long. As soon as he slipped through the door, she was in his arms, letting out a shuddering breath as she pressed her face against his neck. And then just as abruptly, she released him, her expression full of concern.

"What happened?"

He shrugged, sweeping off his cloak. "Just a routine visit."

"*Routine?* Severus, you look terrible."

"Thank you," he said dryly.

"No, I only meant..." She hesitated, reaching up to touch his face. "You're so pale."

"I'm fine."

"You're shaking."

"Yes, well, I haven't slept in nearly 24 hours."

Before she could respond, he reached out to take her hand. She didn't protest as he led her to the bedroom, nor did she object as he undressed them both. She merely stood there, quiet and subdued, seeming to understand his need for reassurance as he embraced her from behind. There were no amorous intentions in the way he pressed himself against her, just a deep, inexplicable craving to feel her skin against his. It was as if the clothing he'd discarded were a metaphor for all the things that stood between them. War. Bloodshed. Death.

Indeed, he would've given anything to strip away those harsh realities, to entwine his body so closely with hers that nothing could tear them apart.

Perhaps that was why he made love to her after all, though he certainly hadn't planned it that way. It was an impulse that came as naturally as breathing — simple, mindless, involuntary, a soothing rhythm of gasps and moans and sighs beneath the candlelight. Where he found the energy, he couldn't say. All he knew was an overwhelming urge to bury himself deep inside her, as deep as he could go, a need for unity in a world torn asunder. When it came, his release was no more than an afterthought, his body limp with exhaustion as he rested his head on her breast.

"Severus?"

"Hmmm?"

"What *really* happened?"

Quietly, he explained, starting with Voldemort's unexpected appearance at the gate, followed by the encounter in his office. He described his initial horror at being summoned, the relief he'd felt when he'd realized it was just another one of the Carrows' petty schemes. Deciding not to mention Harry's capture and subsequent escape, he focused on Voldemort's curious need for solitude instead.

"I don't understand," Lily said. "Why did he want to be left outside?"

"I have no idea. Personally, I was far more concerned when he insisted on touring the school alone. I was so certain he was headed straight for the seventh floor."

"That must've been terrifying."

"It was," he agreed, knowing it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. "When I think about what was at stake, what he might've discovered..."

"But he didn't."

"No, but he could have. Which is why..." He hesitated, swallowing hard.

"What is it?"

"I've been thinking... well, perhaps you should go into hiding."

"I'm already in hiding."

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But you must realize that this isn't necessarily the safest place for you. Not when the Dark Lord can appear on our doorstep at any moment, when we both know where your son's quest is leading. Barring the unexpected, the final confrontation is almost certain to happen here."

"I know." She paused, letting out a heavy sigh. "Which is why I don't want to leave."

"Lily..."

"Everything I love is *here*... or will be once Harry arrives. Why would I go anywhere else?"

"To protect yourself and our child. To spare me a great deal of anxiety? If the worst should happen..."

But then he trailed off, instinct at war with common sense. Yes, perhaps she *would* be more secure in some safe house, hundreds of miles from the coming conflict. But would that really soothe his anxieties? Here at Hogwarts, at least he had *some* measure of control, the reassurance of knowing he'd do everything in his power to protect her should the need arise. If he entrusted her safety to others...

From out of nowhere, an image flickered across his mind. He saw a younger version of himself kneeling on the ground at Dumbledore's feet, his expression one of pure desperation.

"*Hide them. Hide them all.*"

Before Dumbledore could respond, his features twisted, careworn lines transforming into the grotesque. Severus recoiled, cursing the strength of his imagination as it rendered a scene he hadn't even witnessed firsthand. Wormtail, beady eyes shining with triumph, whispering

his treachery into the Dark Lord's ear. From that point on, Severus had been powerless to protect her... or perhaps he'd never had that power to begin with.

Would she have been spared if he'd taken a different course of action? He'd wondered that countless times — indeed, it had been his singular obsession throughout those long years of bitter remorse. If he hadn't turned to Dumbledore... if he hadn't revealed that fucking prophecy... if he'd never become a Death Eater in the first place...

Of course, there was no predicting what the past might've been, just as there was no way of knowing what the future might hold.

In the end, that was the true motivation behind his suggestion. It wasn't that he *wanted* her to go into hiding — indeed, all his instincts rebelled against it. No, it was knowing that the choice had to be *hers* this time. He couldn't let her suffer for a decision he'd made on her behalf, couldn't allow her to stay without making her fully aware of the risks. Most of all, she needed to know that she *did* have other options... that he'd do nothing to discourage her from leaving if that was what she chose.

"Lily," he said, lifting his head to meet her eyes. "This is entirely up to you. Before you decide, however, you need to understand how this is likely to play out."

"Go on."

"When the boy arrives, it will not be long before the Dark Lord is alerted to his presence. When that happens, an entire host of Death Eaters will descend upon the castle, along with various allies. Dementors, werewolves, Inferi..."

She shrugged. "I've already been through one war. Might've spent part of it in hiding, but before that, I *did* fight for the Order."

"Yes," he said. "But this is different. The carnage will be like nothing you've ever seen. Whatever happens, Hogwarts will not surrender the boy without a fight. Many people will die."

"I know."

"Children included."

Reflexively, she moved her hand, bringing it to rest on the curve of her stomach.

"I will do everything I can to protect them — to protect *you* if it comes to that. But I cannot blow my cover. That is crucial. Even if that means abandoning the school, fighting for the other side, I will have no choice but to..."

"I know."

"And you still wish to stay?"

"Yes."

"For your own sake," he said, determined to be as thorough as possible. "Not out of any obligation you might feel toward me?"

She sighed. "This is what I want, Severus. You don't have to..."

“What about your children? Have you thought about what it might mean for *them* if you remain here?”

“My *children*?”

She let out a choking sound, her body starting to shake. Alarmed, he lifted his head to peer down at her, cursing himself for not choosing his words more carefully. It didn’t take much to make her cry these days — even a sharp tone of voice could set her off. But there were no tears in her eyes this time, no telltale signs of distress. She was...

*Laughing.*

“Forgive me,” he said stiffly. “But I don’t see how this situation can possibly be construed as amusing.”

“No,” she said, managing to bring herself under control. “No, it isn’t that. It’s you... asking me if I’ve thought about my children. That’s all I ever do, Severus. Day and night. As for the future, what it might mean for them... I obsess over it. You don’t understand yet, what it means to be a parent, but...”

“Perhaps not,” he interrupted, feeling a jolt of anguish at her words. No, he didn’t understand... and in all likelihood, he never would. He’d known that all along, of course, had been well aware that he wouldn’t survive to see his child born. What he *hadn’t* realized was how painful it would be to accept that reality, a sense of helpless futility that grew stronger by the day. He could feel it swelling within him, shifting and expanding, like some cruel mimicry of her changing appearance.

“Severus?”

“Of course you’ve thought of them,” he said, forcing himself to focus. “I’d never suggest otherwise. But if you choose to stay, that decision must be based in logic. Not emotional reactions or sentiment.”

“*Sentiment?*”

“Lily...” He hesitated, knowing he was treading on dangerous ground. “I’m merely saying that I don’t want you to put yourself in a position where you might do something... impulsive. What will happen when you know your son is nearby, that he’s well within your reach? I imagine that would have a profound effect on you either way, but in your condition, it could be dangerous. You might not be able to stop yourself from...”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you saying I’m irrational? That I can’t control my emotions?”

He cringed, struggling to ignore the numerous examples that flashed through his mind. The sudden mood swings, her tendency to burst into tears at the smallest provocation, not to mention one particularly baffling scene that had happened just the other night. He’d come home to find her staring at herself in the bathroom mirror, tracing the faint lines that had appeared on the underside of her belly. “Ugly,” she’d called them, before insisting that he couldn’t possibly find her attractive in her current state.

Irrational. Yes. Definitely a word he’d use, though he didn’t dare to do so now.

“No,” he said firmly. “I only meant that... well, love can make any of us irrational. Myself included. Instinct can sometimes overrule common sense.”



“Instinct,” she repeated, pushing herself into a sitting position. “Right.”

“You can’t pretend it isn’t a factor.”

“I’m not, Severus. But I’m perfectly capable of controlling myself.”

Part of him desperately wanted to drop the subject. If it had been even a fraction less important, he would have. But the sense of urgency he’d felt all night hadn’t faded, the conviction that there was precious little time left to make these preparations. And so he pressed on, hoping like hell she wouldn’t pack him off to sleep in the study by the end of it all.

“That may be true,” he said, doing his best to sound gentle, “as it pertains to most things. But this is your son we’re speaking of, a child you’ve longed to be reunited with for many years. If you knew he was here, that he was in the castle at this very moment, how would you feel?”

Hesitating, she let out a heavy sigh. “I’d want to go to him... see him, touch him, make sure he was okay. But that doesn’t mean...”

“You can’t reveal yourself to him, Lily. Not under these circumstances. If — *when* — he comes here, the Dark Lord will not be far behind. To distract him at such a crucial moment could be disastrous.”

“Severus,” she whispered, sounding pained. “Do you think I haven’t realized that? As irrational as you think I am...”

“I never said...”

“You didn’t have to.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but she held up a hand to stop him.

“No, don’t try to explain. I *am* a bit emotional lately. I’ll freely admit that. But if you think I’d endanger my son — either of my children — just to indulge my feelings...”

“Bloody hell, I’m making a mess of this.”

“No,” she said, reaching for his discarded shirt and shrugging it on. “You’re just forgetting one important thing.”

“What’s that?”

To his surprise, she smiled. “That you’re not responsible for *everything*. Some of us are capable of figuring out our own solutions, you know.”

“Meaning?” He cocked an eyebrow.

“Do you know what I’ve been doing for the past few months? How I spend my days when you’re off at work?”

Mutely, he shook his head, choosing not to mention her naps.

“I’ve been researching strategies. Brushing up on Defense tactics. I’ve also been making potions. Lots and lots of potions. Whatever I could think of, anything that might come in useful if there’s a battle. I take it you haven’t been down to your lab recently?”

“No.”

“Well,” she said, her expression smug. “The next time you visit, you might want to take a look at the crates against the wall. You can send them to the Hospital Wing if you like. I’ve already saved plenty for us.”

“Us?” he echoed, feeling a little stunned.

She heaved herself out of bed, dropping to her knees beside it. As he leaned over to watch, she slid her arms underneath, grunting softly as she withdrew what appeared to be a large suitcase.

“Wait,” he said as she started to lift it. “Let me do that.”

He was glad he’d offered. The case was much heavier than he’d expected, straining his tired muscles as he heaved it onto the bed.

“Open it,” she said, her voice breathless with anticipation.

“Very well.”

Unfastening the buckles, he slid the lid off, his eyes widening as he did so. Dozens of vials lay within, shimmering up at him in every possible hue and color. Blood Replenisher. Multiple variations of pain potions. Numerous antidotes to poisons, along with an impressive assortment of ointments. She’d even... he reached for one of the vials, holding it up to the light for closer inspection.

“Polyjuice,” she said quietly.

“Yes, I know what it is. Why would you...”

“You want me to act rationally? Fair enough. Maybe I should tell you about my plan.”

“Your *plan*?”

“Obviously, Harry shouldn’t see me during the battle, but it isn’t just that. I have to make sure that no one else does either. That would put both of you at risk, and besides, I’d be an obvious target.” She paused, glancing down at her stomach. “All things considered, that isn’t a risk I’m willing to take.”

“No,” he agreed.

“Polyjuice just seemed like the best solution, especially if I can disguise myself as someone inconspicuous.”

“Yes, but you’d have to remember to take it every hour.”

She shrugged. “That’s why I’ve been making so much. Between that and an alarm charm, I’m sure I can handle it.”

“I imagine you can,” he said, “though it would be preferable for you to avoid that entirely. You’d be safest here in these quarters, or in the Room of Requirement, if you wish.”

“Yes, but it might not work out that way. I know you think I’m naive, but...”

“I don’t...”

She shook her head, holding up a hand to stop him. “But there’s one thing I *do* know about battle. It’s chaos. We can prepare for it to some degree, but in the end, we can’t predict what’s going to happen. I want to make sure I have the means to conceal myself no matter where I might be.”

Severus had never underestimated Lily’s intelligence. Indeed, he’d always known she was clever. But this calm, logical part of her, this meticulous way of planning ahead? He’d seen glimpses of it before, but he hadn’t fully recognized it for what it was.

Maturity? Yes, that was part of it. But there was something more, too. It was a quiet self-assurance, a sense of self that made it clear she didn’t need anyone questioning her choices. She would remain at Hogwarts, yes, but that was no ill-informed decision. In the end, she was quite capable of taking care of herself.

“Well,” she said, folding her hands in her lap. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re bloody brilliant.”

“Really?”

“Without a doubt. I also think...” He picked up his wand, sliding the case of potions back under the bed with a series of tiny flicks. “I think I might need to replenish my supplies.”

“Yeah, you’re running a little low. Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be.”

Turning onto his side, he wrapped an arm around her, one hand resting on her stomach as his eyes drifted closed. Idly, he wondered about the child growing inside her, whether he’d have the chance to feel it move before the end. That was as far as he allowed himself to hope these days, refusing to think about gender or names, nor what his offspring might look like. Why torture himself, when he knew he wouldn’t be around to teach the child, to provide for it and watch it grow?

In one way, that was a bitter potion to swallow, an undeniable source of pain. And yet something peaceful settled over him as his fingers moved reflexively, caressing the child within. Lily might’ve taken him by surprise tonight, exceeding all expectations. But she’d been wrong about one thing.

He *did* know what it meant to be a parent. It was finding comfort in the one thing he *could* still give this child, which also happened to be the most important gift of all.

Part of that gift was Lily, a mother who’d love this tiny being, protect it, defend it to her dying breath. This child would be cherished in a way Severus himself had never known, would never understand what it was to feel unwanted.

Of course, the other part came down to him. No, perhaps he’d never know his offspring, but his death wouldn’t be in vain. It would be a necessary sacrifice, the price to be paid for the future he intended to purchase for his loved ones.

*Loved ones?*

At that thought, Severus cracked open an eye, lifting his head to stare down at Lily’s stomach. She was sound asleep by then, oblivious to his bewilderment as he touched her,

seeking answers in the rounded contours of flesh. Love? How could he *love* someone he'd never met, a being that wasn't even fully formed? The concept was bizarre. No name, no face or identity, just...

Love.

"Fuck," he muttered as he laid his head back down.

Yes, he loved this child. There was no denying it. Loved it enough to die for it, as surely as he'd give his life for Lily herself.

Bizarre? Yes. But certainly not unwelcome.

## 76. Hidden Missives

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### Chapter 76: Hidden Missives

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Cautiously, Lily ducked into the parlor, sighing in relief as she spotted Minerva. Her old professor glanced up at the exact same moment, gray eyes widening as she watched her approach.

“Dear me!”

“I know,” Lily said, blushing as she glanced down at herself. She’d never felt more pregnant, her belly an unmistakable protrusion as she sank down onto the couch.

“You’re...”

“Huge,” she interrupted. “Or at least, I feel that way. I don’t even want to imagine how I’m going to look in a couple months.”

“How far along are you?”

She frowned. “Today is...”

“April 19.”

“About 20 weeks,” she said, accepting a cup of tea.

Minerva focused her attention on the teapot, obviously doing her best not to stare. Lily was hardly surprised by her reaction — this was the first chance they’d had to meet since January, when her waistline had been as slim as a girl’s. The thought made her chuckle as she settled into a more comfortable position, resting a hand on her rounded stomach.

“Are you feeling all right?”

“Never better.”

“And Severus? He’s...”

“He’s been wonderful. A bit overattentive at times, but that’s nothing to complain about.”

“Well, no,” Minerva said, looking slightly bewildered. “I suppose it wouldn’t be.”

Lily hesitated and then shrugged, abruptly changing the subject. “Do you remember the Horcrux that was hidden here?”

“The one you destroyed?”

She nodded. “Harry’s going to come looking for it sooner or later. He has no way of knowing it’s already gone.”

“Ah, yes,” Minerva said, sipping at her tea. “Still in hiding last I heard, and thank Merlin for it. But if you’re trying to keep him away...”

“No, I *want* him to come to Hogwarts. I’m desperate to see him, obviously, but he’ll also have more protection here. Besides, Severus has information he needs to pass along, which...”

Minerva snorted. “Now *there’s* a complication. Harry’s more likely to curse that man on sight than listen to a single word out of his mouth.”

“I know.” Lily paused, letting out a heavy sigh. “He insists he has a plan, but he won’t tell me what it is.”

“Typical Slytherin.”

There was no malice behind the comment. No, Minerva almost smiled when she said it, her lips twitching at the corners. But that didn’t stop Lily’s eyes from filling with tears, her voice thick with emotion as she spoke again.

“If it wasn’t for a *Gryffindor*, we wouldn’t be in this situation. If Dumbledore hadn’t kept the truth from Harry for so long... if he hadn’t refused to tell anyone about the Horcruxes... if he hadn’t made everyone believe that Severus was a... traitor... murderer...”

She buried her face in her hands, helpless frustration at war with embarrassment as she struggled to bring herself under control. Through the sound of her sniffles, she heard a soft sigh, leaning into the embrace as she felt an arm slide around her shoulders.

“Better?” Minerva said after a moment.

“I’m sorry, I...”

“No, I am. You know how Gryffindors are — we don’t always think before we speak.”

Unable to help herself, Lily laughed, dabbing at her eyes with the sleeve of her robe. “Not so good at controlling our emotions either, are we?”

“Well,” Minerva said, casting a pointed glance at her stomach. “I’d say you have a better excuse than most. Now what were you saying?”

“What? Oh, right. Harry needs to know about the diadem. It’ll save him precious time, give him an advantage he doesn’t know he has. He’s going to need that, Minerva. We all will.”

Minerva nodded.

“The problem is that I don’t know how to reach him. That’s why I came to you.”

“Why not send your Patronus?”

Lily hesitated, then shook her head. “It needs to come from someone he trusts. Someone he can talk to, ask questions if need be. Besides...”

“You want him to come to Hogwarts,” Minerva finished for her. “He’ll have no reason to do that if he knows the Horcrux is gone.”

“Exactly.”

“Right. Well, no need to worry. I’m sure we can come up with something.”

“I’m not keeping you from anything, am I?”

“It’s Sunday,” Minerva said with a smile, “and a surprisingly peaceful one at that. I’m sure I can spare an hour or two.”

“Where’s Charity?”

“Taking care of some rodents down in the dungeons.”

“Mice?” Lily frowned.

“Not exactly.”

“Rats?”

Minerva shook her head. “Bigger.”

Lily hesitated, thoroughly confused. But then she noticed a glint in Minerva’s eye, followed by the slightest twitch at the corner of her mouth.

“The Carrows,” she said, returning the smirk as she reached for another biscuit. “She’s...”

“Wrecking their quarters, I believe.”

As if on cue, the cat bounded into the room, her tail waving jauntily as she jumped up on the table.

“How did it go?” Minerva said.

*Well, Charity thought at them both, let’s just say there are some smells even magic can’t get rid of.*

“Urine?”

*Got it all over their clothes. Their bedding, too. Stashed a few dead things here and there, left a nice little surprise in one of their shoes...*

Lily wrinkled her nose, glad she was well past her morning sickness. She didn’t want to imagine how queasy this conversation would’ve made her a couple months ago.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said after a moment. “But Harry...”

“Right,” Minerva said, her expression growing serious. “So you want to be sure he makes it to Hogwarts before...”

*Before what?* Charity interrupted.

Briefly, Lily filled her in before turning her attention back to Minerva. “Yes, it has to happen here. We’ve got to do it before he disappears into the Room of Requirement, and it’ll have to come from someone he trusts.”

*You could tell him yourself.*

“He doesn’t even know I’m alive,” Lily said quietly, blinking back the sudden moisture in her eyes. “There are so many things I need to tell him, so much to explain... seeing me will

contradict the only reality he's ever known. That alone will be hard enough. Trying to tell him about the Horcrux on top of that?"

"Yes, but..."

But Lily wasn't listening as she continued, logic at war with painful longing. "If You-Know-Who is coming for him," she said, her voice slightly choked, "he'll need to stay focused. He can't afford any distractions."

*Don't you think he'll want to see you? That he'll be glad to know that you're alive?*

"I hope so," she whispered. "But whatever happens, it'll have to wait until after the battle. He's sure to be confused... shocked... I don't want to do anything that might leave him vulnerable, no matter how much..."

"The timing is hardly ideal," Minerva said, her voice gentle. "I'll give you that. But it might be the only chance you'll have. From what you've told me, Albus believed... no, don't interrupt. Even if he was wrong, that doesn't change the fact that the situation is dire. What Harry will be facing..."

"I know what he'll be facing. I've faced it myself, remember?"

"Yes, dear, I know. But this is different."

"No, it isn't. That... that madman came after Harry, and I found a way to save him, didn't I? If I did it once, I can certainly..."

"You can't sacrifice yourself," Minerva said. "Not again. There's your condition to consider, among other things. Is an attempt to save one child worth putting the other in mortal danger?"

"I'm not going to let anything happen to this baby," Lily said, both hands dropping to rest on her stomach. "But I won't let Harry die."

"If Dumbledore was right, I don't see how you can stop it."

That was the problem. Lily didn't either. She'd spent months combing through books, exhausting the Restricted Section before turning her attention to Severus's personal collection. In the end, all she'd learned was far more than she'd ever wanted to know about Dark magic, none of which would help her.

Still, there had to be a solution. Her mind simply couldn't accept the alternative. Besides, she still had a final idea, one that was both blatantly obvious and ludicrous in the extreme. Would it work? She didn't know... but she sure as hell wasn't giving up until she took that chance.

"Nevermind," she said, her voice firm. "Whether I'll be able to save Harry isn't the issue. I'm only looking for the best way to tell him about the Horcrux. I can't do it myself, so..."

"I'll do it," Minerva said.

"That could work... if you're able to get to him in time. But what if you can't? If he sneaks into the castle..."

"Impossible. Severus sealed up all the passages months ago."



Lily smiled. "Are you sure about that?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Anyway, it doesn't matter how he gets in. He'll head straight to the Room of Requirement, so we'll need someone who can reach him before he gets there."

*Unless, Charity interjected, they're already inside.*

Minerva leaned forward, her eyes fixed on the cat. "The children," she said quietly. "Is that where they've gone?"

"Children?" Lily frowned, a half forgotten memory tickling at the edge of her consciousness. Severus had mentioned something about that, hadn't he? She'd been lying in his arms, somewhere between awake and dreaming, struggling to focus on his voice as he'd told her about his day. He'd said that an entire group of children had gone missing, though he hadn't seemed troubled by their disappearance. On that note, she'd drifted off to sleep, comforted by his reassurance that they were in a safe place.

The Room of Requirement? Yes, that would make sense.

"I should've known," Minerva said, echoing her thoughts. "Charity, why didn't you tell me?"

*You didn't ask.*

"Impossible beast. You know very well..."

"Which children?" Lily interrupted. "Anyone I know?"

Minerva rattled off a list of names, though there was one in particular that stood out to her. Could she trust Neville to tell Harry about the diadem? Yes, she supposed she could, especially since she wouldn't have to tell him that it was a Horcrux. If she phrased it just right, the message would be clear enough to the one who needed to hear it.

But could *Harry* trust Neville? That was the real question.

Well, she supposed there was only one way to find out.

"I want to see them," she said abruptly.

Minerva looked startled. "The children?"

"Yes. I think they can help."

"I'm sure they'd be willing to try, but..."

"Yes?" Lily said, certain she knew what was coming.

"But it isn't that simple," Minerva said, setting her cup down. "They're in the Room of Requirement, for one thing. How would we reach them?"

"If we know which version of the room they're in, we should be able to access it easily enough."

"But how will we know?"

Lily hesitated, giving Minerva a thoughtful look. She couldn't be sure, of course, but it would only make sense that the room the students were using was similar to the one where she'd hidden from Voldemort. It might take a bit of trial and error, but she was pretty sure she could get in. If not... well, no use worrying over hypotheticals.

"I have an idea," she said quietly. "Anything else?"

"They'll see you."

"I know, but..." Lily trailed off, understanding the implications. Granted, the children were unlikely to recognize her, especially if she was hooded and cloaked. But it wasn't like they were going to stay in the Room of Requirement forever, was it? They'd come out sooner or later, and when they did, there was no telling who might be around, ready to torture them for information. The Carrows, some other Death Eater, Lord Voldemort himself? Yes, any of those were possible, especially if they were unlucky enough to emerge in the middle of a battle.

Nonetheless, her mind was made up, though she knew she'd have to proceed with extreme caution.

"Polyjuice."

"Pardon?"

"I'll use Polyjuice. I've got a bunch of it — been making it for months."

"Yes," Minerva said slowly. "That might work. But you couldn't just impersonate anyone, you know. It would have to be someone the children would know. Someone they'd trust."

"Hmmm."

Lily had already been puzzling over that dilemma, albeit for different reasons. She'd promised Severus she'd stay in disguise if the castle was invaded, which still seemed like the best decision for everyone involved. But figuring out who she should pass herself off as? That was another matter entirely.

Of course, it would have to be someone familiar. Posing as a stranger inside Hogwarts would only lead to problems. But she couldn't choose anyone *too* familiar either. Certainly not anyone who was already at the school or might show up at any given time.

*Me.*

"What?" Lily and Minerva said in unison.

*You can impersonate me.*

"Well," Lily said, recovering her wits somewhat. "That might be a problem. You-Know-Who believes he killed you last summer, remember? Your survival could easily be traced back to Severus, not to mention... didn't you say there were other Death Eaters around at the time?"

*About a dozen.*

"Right. And what do you think would happen if they saw you? Or to be more specific, me disguised as you?"

*Identical twin?*

Lily chuckled. "I don't think they'd stop to consider that."

*Perhaps not, Charity conceded. But a sibling... you know, that's not a bad idea.*

"What do you mean?" Minerva said, leaning forward with an expression of interest.

*Well, Lily would still use the Polyjuice. She'd just finish it off with a couple glamours. Someone who isn't me but looks enough like me to pass as a close relation, maybe?*

Lily nodded, waiting for her to continue.

*Besides, most of the Wizarding world has no idea what happened to me. There'd be nothing suspicious about a concerned relative showing up at my former workplace, searching for information. Especially if she happens to be friends with the Deputy Headmistress.*

"And," Minerva said, "I don't believe the children would be too hesitant to trust you. They always loved Charity. We'd just have to be sure..."

*Did they?* the cat interjected, looking pleased. *That's nice to hear.*

Minerva snorted, poking her in the side. "Quit fishing for compliments. We're attempting to have a serious conversation here."

*Oh, fish. That sounds good.*

"I agree," Lily said, her stomach growling at the suggestion. "Maybe I can nip down to the kitchens when we're done."

"Bloody incorrigible, the both of you. I should deduct House Points."

*Is that even possible?*

"Go ahead and try," Lily said, flashing her a cheeky grin. "I'll just have Severus give them back."

"Hmmpf."

"Seriously though, you're right. We need to figure this out."

*Sounds like we've got a good solution already.*

"For the most part," Lily agreed. "But we're forgetting one thing."

*What's that?*

"Well, you're not exactly..."

"You're not *human*, Charity," Minerva interrupted.

*True. But we might be able to work around that.*

"How?" Lily cocked an eyebrow. "If you're going to suggest cat fur..."

*Don't be ridiculous.* Charity paused, lowering her head to sniff pointedly at an empty saucer. *I believe some of my things are still here. Aren't my quarters still vacant?*

Minerva reached for the pitcher of cream. "Alecto seems content to stay in the dungeons with that repulsive brother of hers. I doubt she even knows there are designated quarters for the Muggle Studies professor, much less where to find them."

*I think I left a hairbrush up there.*

Lily frowned. "Wouldn't that hair be a little old?"

*Less than a year. Besides, what's the worst that could happen? Either you'll change or you won't.*

"True." Lily sighed, retrieving a vial from her pocket. "All right then. We'll give it a shot."

*Who's going to get the brush?*

Minerva rose to her feet, giving both of them an exasperated look. "As the only human here who can move freely around the castle, I'd say I'm the most logical person for the job. I'll be back shortly."

"Be careful."

"Careful of what?" she said, glancing back over her shoulder as she reached the door. "Careful not to hex the Carrows? I'll do my best, but I'm not making any promises."

True to her word, she was gone for less than 15 minutes, returning with full pockets and a satisfied smile. "Charity," she said as she settled herself back on the couch. "I would've never known."

With that, she withdrew a tiny object from her pocket, restoring it to its normal size. It was a large bottle of Ogden's, empty save for an inch of amber liquid.

*Purely medicinal, I assure you.*

Minerva smirked, pulling out a second bottle. "Poor thing. Your health must've been plaguing you night and day."

*After that incident at Filius's birthday last year, you're hardly one to...*

Minerva cleared her throat abruptly, enlarging the hairbrush and setting it on the table. "Ah, yes. I think I see a few strays here. You didn't let anyone else use this, did you?"

*Certainly not.*

Nodding, she plucked several stray hairs out of the bristles, accepting the vial of Polyjuice from Lily. Removing the cork, she let the hairs drift down into the liquid, watching intently as it began to change color. It transformed into a rich, earthy brown, shimmering slightly in the afternoon light.

Lily eyed it nervously. "I'm not so sure about this."

*Come on. Where's that Gryffindor courage?*

"I guess I've been living with a Slytherin for too long. Besides..." She trailed off, glancing down at her stomach.

“From what I understand,” Minerva said, “Polyjuice is perfectly safe for pregnant women, as long as you’re impersonating a member of the same sex. Your body will know how to shift to accommodate a child.”

“That’s... comforting,” Lily said, though of course, it wasn’t. Not in the least.

But in the end, she knew what she had to do. Harry needed to know the truth about the Horcrux, of course, but it was more than that. When he arrived at Hogwarts, she needed to be prepared. She had to be ready to impersonate someone else for hours, perhaps even days, knowing the fate of her loved ones might very well depend on her ability to do so. Better to get used to it now, figure out exactly how she was supposed to think, act, and behave, rather than leaving it until the last possible moment.

Without a word, she picked up the vial, downing it in one swallow. The taste wasn’t unpleasant — rather like gingerbread. But when she opened her mouth to say so, all that emerged was a sharp gasp.

Of course, this wasn’t the first time she’d taken Polyjuice. She’d used it several times while working for the Order, not to mention her impersonation of Severus the year before. But this was different somehow, her insides shifting painfully rather than the mild discomfort she was used to. It didn’t take her long to figure out why — the female body might be built to accommodate a child, but enduring five months worth of changes in a matter of seconds was no easy thing. Her breasts throbbed. Her hips ached. Her stomach seemed to flatten, only to expand again, skin pulled so taut that it brought tears to her eyes. To add insult to injury, the baby responded with a hard kick, hitting her directly in the ribs.

“Bloody hell,” she whimpered, but it wasn’t her own voice she heard. This one was softer, almost girlish, catching in her throat as she let out another moan.

And just like that, it was over, her discomfort fading as she gazed down at her new form. She was much more stout now, several inches shorter with broader hips and larger breasts. Granted, it was still obvious that she was pregnant — her dress was now skintight, clinging to her body like a sheet of flypaper. But with proper clothing, the protrusion of her belly would be much less apparent, balanced out by the added weight.

“I’m going to need something else to wear,” she said.

“Yes,” Minerva said, raising an eyebrow. “I’d imagine so.”

Fortunately, there were certain advantages in spending time with a Transfiguration master. Minerva picked up a napkin, transforming it into one of the softest, most beautiful robes Lily had ever seen. It was a deep shade of blue, the seams interwoven with sparkling silver thread.

“Thank you,” she said as she accepted the garment. “Um, would you mind?”

Minerva turned around immediately, fixing her gaze on the wall. But Charity stayed right where she was, her round eyes bright with curiosity.

*Well, she thought at Lily. It’s my body. Besides, I’ve never been pregnant. Always wondered what I’d look like.*

Lily wanted to protest, but there was a strange vulnerability in Charity’s words, an emotion she couldn’t help but recognize. How many times had she felt that way while stuck in animal

form, wondering what she might've looked like at 25, 30, 35? She'd obsessed over how her human appearance might've transformed, wondering if she would've gained weight or changed her hair, or whether she would've started to resemble either of her parents as she'd grown older.

And yes, there'd been times when she'd imagined herself carrying her second child... the child she'd never thought she'd have.

Without a word, she slipped the straps off her shoulders, unable to suppress her grunts of frustration as she attempted to wriggle out of the dress. Eventually, she managed to get it off, trying not to squirm as the cat inspected her from head to toe.

*Hmmm... not bad, is it?*

"No," she agreed, though she couldn't bring herself to look down at her naked body. Silly, perhaps, but it seemed like an invasion of privacy, especially with Charity sitting there watching her. "No, you carry it well."

With that, she slipped into the robe, sighing in pleasure as the velvety soft fabric caressed her skin. It was a perfect fit, draping loosely over her curves, concealing far more than it revealed.

*If I ever get my human form back, Charity observed. Minerva will be making all my clothes.*

"When," Lily said firmly. "Not if. Minerva? You can turn around now."

There were several moments of silence, followed by a huff of approval. "Yes, I suppose that will work. Would you like to try a couple of glamours?"

"Please."

Minerva nodded, waving her wand in a smooth, intricate motion. "*Adtenuo.*"

The changes started in Lily's breasts, of all places, a slight prickle as they appeared to grow smaller. Next came her belly, which flattened somewhat, making it hard to tell whether she was pregnant or simply overweight. Her nose shrank, too — she picked up a silver biscuit platter to watch it reshape itself, smiling as it became longer and more pointed.

*"Oculis caeruleis."*

Abruptly, her eyes switched color, deep brown transforming into crystal blue.

"One more, I think," Minerva said, staring at her thoughtfully. "What color hair would you like to have?"

"Let's try blonde."

*"Mellis flava."*

Her hair — or Charity's hair, to be more exact — lightened by several shades, mousy brown giving way to a rich honey blonde.

Minerva nodded, looking satisfied. "I think that will do."

"It's perfect."

And it was, really. The basic facial structure had stayed the same, as had the overall shape of her body. She still looked enough like Charity to easily pass as a close relative, but not so much that she could possibly be mistaken for her. Her appearance was rather appealing, really. She was pretty in a soft, matronly way, her cheeks pink with good health. The robe was even more flattering now, the rich blue bringing out the color of her eyes while complementing the sunny shade of her hair.

“Perfect,” she repeated. “Thank you, Minerva.”

“You’re welcome, dear.”

Charity had gone quiet, lying on the table with her head resting on her paws. On one hand, her reaction wasn’t difficult to understand — Lily had missed being human, too. But then again, she’d never had to watch as someone inhabited her former body, could only imagine what a jarring experience that had to be. Fortunately, the glamours seemed to be helping somewhat — Charity finally sat up, scrutinizing her from head to toe.

*You look like my mother when she was young.*

“She must’ve been very pretty.” And then softening her voice even further, she said, “You’ll get it back, Charity. It shouldn’t be much longer now.”

If she’d been human, Lily had a feeling the cat would’ve shrugged. But there was no mistaking the sadness in her eyes, her movements less energetic than usual as she hopped off the table and wandered over to the door.

“So you want to give it a try?” Minerva questioned.

“Yes, and we better do it soon. This isn’t going to last long, and I’d rather not use up more Polyjuice than I have to.”

“Right. Well, you can’t go alone.”

“But...” Lily trailed off, thinking about the passages. That would certainly be the safest way, the only guarantee that she wouldn’t be seen. But it wasn’t that simple, was it? No, not when Minerva was unable to access the passages without Severus’s permission. Lily knew she couldn’t appear by herself — she’d scare the children to death.

“How?” she said after a moment, giving Minerva a helpless look. “I know you need to go with me, but how?”

“Well, it *is* Sunday. I don’t imagine many people will be visiting the seventh floor today. But getting you up there...”

“Oh, no need to worry about that. I can get as far as...” She paused to consider. “I think there’s an opening a couple doors down.”

Minerva nodded, rising to her feet. “Brilliant. I’ll just meet you up there then.”

“Wait.”

“What is it?”

“If it was just coming out of one room and ducking into another, I’m sure I could manage. But this might take a bit of guesswork.”

*At least you don't have to worry about being recognized as yourself,* Charity pointed out.

"That's true," Minerva agreed. "Combine that with Disillusionment and a temporary Repellent Charm and it should be reasonably safe."

"I guess that would work." Lily heaved herself to her feet. "Okay, let's go."

A few minutes later, she'd reached her destination, holding her breath as she pressed the tiny button. She motioned to Charity, hanging back in the dusty old storeroom as the cat stepped out into the hall.

"Is it safe?"

*No one up here but Minerva.*

Hesitantly, she moved out into the light, glancing in one direction and then the other before hurrying forward. Casting a quick *Muffliato*, she began to pace in front of the wall, focusing on a single thought.

*I need a place that will keep me safe.*

She'd decided to start with something simple, knowing it would be a lot more tricky if she was forced to get into specifics. Silently, she watched as a door appeared, glancing back to make sure Minerva was following as she entered the room.

Unable to help herself, she burst out laughing. They were standing in a giant playpen, every surface covered with multiple layers of padding. Indeed, the room had listened — there was no way she could come to any harm in this place. Even the chairs were made of soft foam, tables crafted out of the most lightweight plastic she could imagine.

"This isn't it."

"Obviously," Minerva said wryly, shaking her head as they backed out of the room.

Lily tested a couple more theories, neither of which panned out. And then finally, she attempted to be as specific as possible, trying to remember exactly what she'd asked for on the night Voldemort had come to Hogwarts.

*I need a room that Voldemort or his followers cannot possibly enter. Oh yes, and I need to get a message to Harry.*

Again, the door appeared, her breath catching in her throat as she moved to push it open. If *this* didn't work, she didn't know what else...

*"Bloody hell!"*

There was a collection of gasps, followed by a flash of brilliant red light. Before Lily knew it, she was falling, crying out as her knees hit the floor.

"Mr. Longbottom!" Minerva snapped. "Put that wand away immediately! You too, Mr. Goldstein!"

With that, she knelt beside Lily, gray eyes filled with concern. "Are you all right, Li...?"

Somehow, while worrying over the most minor details, they'd forgotten the most obvious thing. "Felicity," Lily muttered, much too low for the children to hear. "Felicity Burbage."



“Brilliant,” Minerva breathed in response. And then louder, she said, “I must apologize on behalf of my students, Felicity. Common sense has never been their strong suit. Are you hurt?”

Lily shook her head as she pushed herself to her feet. It had only been a Stunner, and a weak one at that, grazing her shoulder rather than hitting her directly. She’d cried out in surprise rather than pain, a touch embarrassed now that it was over.

“I’m sorry, Professor McGonagall,” Neville said, his expression cautious as he moved a little closer. “We weren’t expecting...”

“Clearly.”

“It’s all right,” Lily said, flashing him a reassuring smile. “One can hardly blame you with those despicable Carrows skulking about.”

“And that bloody Snape,” called a voice from the back of the room. “He’s the worst of the lot!”

Lily tensed. “Yes, well...”

“He’s the one that killed Dumbledore, you know,” another student piped up. “Murdering bastard.”

“Headmaster Snape is...” Lily trailed off, resisting the urge to yelp as Minerva pinched her arm. “He’s a nasty...”

“So what’s going on?” Neville asked, earning her eternal gratitude for changing the subject. “I don’t mean to be rude, but who are you?”

Minerva stepped forward, giving him a stern look. “This is Felicity Burbage, Mr. Longbottom, and I believe you owe her an apology.”

“Burbage?” Neville frowned.

“Thought you looked familiar!” said a girl who’d moved to stand just behind him.

Lily nodded. “Charity is my older sister. You haven’t seen her, have you? I’ve been searching for months.”

“I’m sorry to say I haven’t,” the girl responded, her expression sad. “She was my favorite teacher... erm, other than you, Professor McGonagall.”

“Of course,” Minerva said dryly.

“When I see her again,” Lily said, flashing the girl a smile. “I’ll be sure to tell her. She’ll be delighted.”

Naturally, none of the students had a clue as to Charity’s whereabouts. But it was necessary to ask — that was her excuse for being at the school, after all. Besides, it gave her a chance to spend a little time with them, to put them at ease before getting to the point of why she’d come.

“Neville,” she said a few minutes later. “That’s your name, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Can I speak with you privately?”

He cast an uncertain look at Minerva, who responded with a curt nod.

“All right then. Where?”

The room was large enough, leaving plenty of space for the students to move around as they pleased. But other than a single door that led to what was probably a bathroom, there really wasn’t anywhere to go. Lily was sure the room would’ve made provisions if she’d asked for them — a storage room, a closet, even a small office. But she had a feeling that Neville felt more comfortable when he was close to his friends.

“We can just step over into the corner.”

Looking relieved, Neville followed her, waiting patiently as she cast a quick *Muffliato*.

“You’re friends with Harry Potter,” she said, turning to him with a gentle smile. “Yes?”

Instantly, he was on his guard, his eyes narrowing as they met hers.

“Neville,” she said softly. “What did you ask for when you came in here? A place that would keep you safe from You-Know-Who and his supporters?”

He hesitated, then nodded.

“And do you trust Professor McGonagall?”

“Of course.”

“Well then, what does that tell you?”

“That you wouldn’t be here if you were going to hurt us?”

“Exactly.” She paused, letting out a chuckle. “If the room didn’t stop me, Minerva certainly would have.”

“I guess you’re right.”

She nodded. “I’m no different from you, really. My friends are in hiding, my loved ones are in danger, and I don’t know how to stop it. It’s frightening, isn’t it? Never knowing what to think, who to trust?”

“Yes.”

“I understand.” Pausing, she sucked in a deep breath. “But believe me, I’m the last person who’d ever do anything to hurt Harry. I just have a message to pass along... information that might help him. I need to make sure he receives it.”

With that, Neville seemed to relax, his wariness replaced by confusion.

“I’d like to help, Ms. Burbage. Really, I would. But I haven’t seen him in months. No one has.”

“I know, but if he comes back to Hogwarts... if you see him...”

Neville’s eyes widened. “Do you really think he’s coming back?”

“Yes, but you mustn’t tell anyone, Neville. If You-Know-Who had the slightest inkling that Harry might show up here...”

“They’d never tell,” he said, his voice filled with pride as he glanced at his friends. “They’d rather die.”

“I’m not questioning that. But if any of them were captured, tortured...”

Neville shook his head, holding up a hand to stop her. “No, I get it. What’s the message? If I see him, I’ll pass it along.”

Lily opened her mouth to tell him before changing her mind, addressing the room instead. “I need a quill and parchment.”

Instantly, the items appeared, materializing right next to her feet. She sat down on the floor, chewing on the tip of the quill for a minute or two before she began to write.

*What was hidden is gone. Don’t waste precious time on a futile search.*

Well, that was certainly vague. Perhaps *too* vague? She stared down at the words, wondering whether she should write something else. But then again, Harry had always been clever, and if he had Hermione Granger with him...

“Okay,” she said, casting a Drying Charm over the ink before rolling the parchment into a tight scroll. “I think that will do.”

Neville plucked it from her hand, tucking it inside his jumper. And then in an unexpected show of gallantry, he held out his hand, bending down to help her to her feet.

“Thank you, Neville.”

“No problem,” he said, shrugging awkwardly.

“Right then. I best be going.” She’d forgotten about the time, casting Minerva an anxious look. She touched her cheek, relieved when the gesture was met with an imperceptible nod.

“We’re off for now,” Minerva announced to the room. “I’ll be back to check on you soon. In the meantime, I expect you to *behave yourselves*. You might be in hiding, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have the power to discipline you as I see fit.”

Most of the students looked fearful, though Neville grinned as he turned back to Lily. “She’s all talk, you know.”

“Oh, trust me, I know. If she followed through on even half her threats, I’d still be in detention.”

“You went to Hogwarts?”

“Of course. It was...” She stopped abruptly, feeling a curious itching sensation on the tip of her nose. “Well, I’ll tell you later.”

He nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Me too.” She was already backing away, making a subtle yet frantic gesture in Minerva’s direction.

“Miss Burbage?”

Her body was starting to change. She could feel it now — breasts swelling under her heavy robes, her waistline narrowing even as the front of her belly pushed outward.

“Yes?” It was all she could do to conceal her panic, moving toward the door by inches as she waited for him to respond.

“When do you think Harry’s going to come back?”

“I don’t know,” she said, gasping under her breath as her stomach gave another lurch.

“I hope it’s soon.”

Despite everything, she couldn’t help but smile. She reached out, giving his hand a little squeeze.

“Me too, Neville. Me too.”

And then she was out the door, groaning as she burst into the hallway. She slumped against the wall, her scalp prickling as shocks of brilliant red hair fell down over her shoulders. Her insides writhed, contracting, expanding, leaving her panting as she cradled her newly distended belly. She couldn’t speak... couldn’t move...

“Who the bloody hell is up here?!”

“Go,” Minerva whispered, her voice frantic. “Go!”

“Can’t...”

But somehow, she found a way, ducking into the storeroom and slamming her palm against the button. She hurled herself into the passageway, the wall sliding closed behind her just as she heard footsteps at the other end of the hall.

“McGonagall,” called a voice, one she instantly recognized as Alecto Carrow. “Any trouble up here?”

“Just a routine patrol.”

“All right. Let me know if...”

And then the words faded, replaced by quiet darkness.

Pushing herself up from her hands and knees, Lily was relieved to discover that the transformation was over. She was herself again, a fact she was eager to confirm as soon as she made it back to her quarters. Polyjuice always had an unsettling effect, but for someone who hadn’t inhabited her own body for the better part of two decades, it was especially jarring.

Stripping off the robe that was now much too large, she gazed at herself in the bathroom mirror, comforted by the sight of her copper hair and bright green eyes, pale skin and long, slender limbs. Her breasts... well, those had changed quite a bit over the past few months. But they were still *hers*, intimately familiar as she ran her hands down her torso, bringing them to rest on her rounded belly.

The baby stirred, making her chuckle as she pressed her fingers down to feel the gentle flutters.

“Come on,” she said softly, taking one last look at herself before she headed to the bedroom. Only then did she realize how tired she was, her muscles aching with exhaustion as she slipped beneath the covers.

Yes, the Polyjuice would take some getting used to. Among other things, she’d have to be more careful in the future, overlapping her doses so they never wore off. But despite the discomfort, the pain, the weariness that followed, it still seemed like an ideal solution, even more so now that the students had gotten to meet her. Her encounter with them stood as proof that she could pass herself off as someone else when the need arose.

More than anything, it was thoughts of Neville that soothed her anxieties, making her smile as her eyes drifted closed. One way or another, she knew Harry would receive her message. It wouldn’t solve everything, but at least it made her feel like she was moving in the right direction.

Of course, that feeling wouldn’t last forever. But for the time being, it was enough.

## 77. Edge of the Abyss

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### Chapter 77: Edge of the Abyss

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“What’s the date today?”

Severus opened his eyes, reaching up to stifle a yawn. “April 26.”

“Oh, good,” Lily said. “My next batch of Polyjuice should be ready.”

Slipping out of bed, she made her way over to the wardrobe, her bare body silhouetted against the curtains. Severus couldn’t help but stare, mesmerized as always by her changing figure. Unfortunately, she was already getting dressed, wrapping herself from head to toe in pale green robes.

“Lily,” he grumbled, his tone more petulant than he would’ve liked. “It’s Sunday. Come back to bed.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Who said anything about sleep?”

“Tempting.” She smiled, perching on the corner of the bed as she reached down to pull her shoes on. “But we can do that later. Come on.”

“Pardon?”

“Let’s go down to the lab.”

He sighed, draping an arm over his eyes. “Not now. I’m exhausted.”

“You weren’t tired a minute ago.”

“Yes, well, there are certain exceptions.”

“Oh,” she said as she moved closer, sliding a hand beneath the blanket. “Is that how it works?”

“Indeed,” he said, his voice dropping to a low murmur as her fingers fluttered over his erection.

“Duly noted.”

Stretching out beside him, she took him in her hand, moving up and down with soft, leisurely strokes. The sensation was pleasant, to say the least, though he couldn’t help craving more. Restlessly, he plucked at the buttons of her robe, his other hand sliding across her breasts.

“Take it off,” he whispered.

Her hand stopped moving. "But I just put it on."

"So?"

"So," she said, making him grunt as she began to stroke him again. "I don't feel like getting dressed twice this morning."

"Lazy."

She shrugged. "I'm pregnant. I'm allowed to be lazy."

"Oh," he said with a smirk, lifting his hips to match her movements. "Is that how it works?"

Smiling, she leaned forward, pressing her lips against his. She moved down, kissing her way across his chest and down his stomach, her hair caressing his thighs as she slid him into her mouth. And then there was nothing but sensation, hot and sweet, drawing forth a shuddering groan as she gradually increased the friction.

"Lily," he panted. "I'm going to... fuck..."

His words were barely comprehensible, swallowed by a howl of pleasure as he buried his hands in her hair. Squeezing his eyes shut, he let his head fall back against the pillow, his body twitching with every swipe of the soft tongue that licked him clean. He'd forgotten how to move, how to speak. All he could do was lie there, humming in satisfaction as she finally pulled away.

"Lazy, am I?"

He shook his head, his voice emerging as a hoarse whisper. "Perish the thought."

For a few minutes, she allowed him to hold her, his arms cradling her close as he dozed beneath the morning sunlight. But he could sense her impatience, her body thrumming with restless energy as she trailed her fingers up and down his back. Grumbling for effect, he heaved himself out of bed, pulling on his clothes as she moved to wait beside the wall.

"And why," he said, reaching out to push the tiny button, "is this so important?"

Taking him by the hand, she led him into the darkened passageway, igniting the tip of her wand as she did so. Judging by her earlier mood, he expected her to respond with some flippant remark. But when she turned to face him, her expression was serious, her eyes wistful.

"I realized something the other day."

"Indeed?" He quirked an eyebrow at her.

She nodded. "We haven't brewed together. Not since we were children. I wanted... well, I don't know how to explain it. I just thought..."

"You wish to escape," he said quietly, "to forget about the madness, at least for a while. Return to a simpler time, where we might lose ourselves in something safe and familiar."

"Yes." She stared up at him with wide eyes. "How did you know?"

"You're not the only one who feels these things. Come."

Taking the lead, he wove his fingers through hers as they descended through the castle. Soon enough, they'd reached the door to his lab, though something made him hesitate. He turned to her then, tipping her chin with one finger until her eyes met his.

Yes, there was another reason she'd wanted to come down here. He knew it, as surely as he could sense it within himself. It was the feeling that they were coming to the end now, standing right at the edge of the abyss. The dark cloud was ready to descend, a massive black shadow that could no longer be ignored.

Where did the feeling come from? He couldn't say. There'd been no new information, no cause for alarm. On the contrary, things had been rather quiet since the night Voldemort had visited Hogwarts, with little change from one day to the next. And yet there was no denying a sense of restless unease, pleading with him to make the most of what little time he had left.

"I love you," he said abruptly. "Whatever happens, don't ever forget that. If things go badly... even if I die in some horrific way..."

"You're not..."

"No," he said, his voice harsh with urgency. "No, Lily. Let me say this. If I die, I want you to know that I don't regret it. Not for a second. You... loving you... without that, I would've never known what it was like to feel truly alive. If you hadn't come back to me... fuck, just the thought of it is unbearable. I would've been a ghost of myself, counting down the days until my demise rather than dreading the end. I wouldn't have wanted..."

He paused, distressed by the sight of her tears. Reaching up to wipe them away, he forced himself to continue, desperate to get the words out. "I was always meant to die for you, Lily. Now or later, it doesn't matter. You mustn't... whatever happens, do not blame yourself. Promise me."

In response, she buried her face in his chest, her body shaking with sobs. She struggled to speak, crying so hard that he couldn't understand her at first. But then the words started to make sense, breaking his heart a little more with each syllable.

"Don't die, Severus. Please don't die. Don't leave me..."

He wanted to tell her that it wasn't that simple, that in all likelihood, he wouldn't have a choice. But she was so distraught that he couldn't bring himself to say it. Instead, he pulled her closer, murmuring in the most soothing voice he could manage.

"Whatever happens," he repeated, forcing the words past the lump in his throat. "It'll be all right."

She pressed herself even closer, her rounded belly mashing against the flat contours of his lower abdomen. And that was when he felt it — a curious sensation, a distinctive thump. He thought he was imagining things, but then there was another, swiftly followed by a third.

"Is that..." he whispered.

With a sniffle, she nodded, lifting her head to glance down at herself. "The baby's moving."

Of course, it had been stirring for weeks now, though this was the first chance he'd had to feel it for himself. According to Lily, it was far more active during the day, falling asleep in



the early evenings just as she did. He'd come back from work and slip into bed beside her, resting his hand on her stomach as he struggled to remain conscious. Minutes, hours, however long he could manage it... all he'd ever felt was Lily's soft, smooth skin, the slight rise and fall of her belly as she'd breathed in the darkness.

But now, the sensation was unmistakable, tiny bumps fluttering across his palm as as he brought a hand down to cradle her stomach.

"I don't think it appreciates being smushed," she said with a little laugh.

Severus barely heard her. He had both hands on her now, barely breathing as the baby continued to move. And that was the moment he truly understood, an abstract concept replaced by stark reality. There really was a *person* inside her, a tiny being he'd helped create. Arms and legs, a face... eyes and mouth, fingers and toes. It could sense things, *feel* things.

Could it feel him now? Did it already know the touch of his hand, the sound of his voice? Would it feel the absence of those things when they were gone?

"What do you think it is?" he asked, his voice choked. "Boy or girl?"

Lily smiled, sliding her hands over his. "I can tell you if you want."

For the first time, he looked up. "You *know*?"

She nodded. "I cast the charm about a month ago."

"You didn't tell me."

"You didn't ask. Well, not until now." She hesitated, taking a deep breath. "It's..."

"Wait."

Closing his eyes, Severus leaned his head against the wall, focusing on the sensations that still fluttered across his open palms. There was no denying his reaction — the heady rush of pride, the eager anticipation, an overwhelming urge to know as much as possible about this child.

*His child.*

And yet just beneath that was a sharp edge of anguish, reminding him all over again that his days were numbered. No... the last thing he needed was even more reason to get attached to this baby, the son or daughter he'd never have the privilege to know. As painful as it was, he needed to accept that it would always be a stranger to him.

*Maybe it doesn't have to be that way,* whispered an insidious voice in the back of his mind. *Perhaps, after all, it isn't too late.*

Ruthlessly, he shut it down.

"Don't tell me," he said, sounding more gruff than he'd intended. "Just answer one question, if you will."

"What's that?"

"When you cast the charm... were you happy with the results?"

Her expression changed, all traces of sadness disappearing as she flashed him a brilliant smile. “Ecstatic.”

“Well,” he said, kissing her on the forehead as he pressed the tiny silver button, “that’s good enough for me. Now let’s brew some potions.”

As soon as they stepped into the room, that struck him as a ludicrous suggestion. Everywhere he looked, there were stacks of crates piled high against the walls. Pain potions. Blood replenisher. Strength potions and antidotes to various poisons, cures for any number of hexes that couldn’t be reversed through ordinary spells. There were dozens upon dozens of carefully labeled vials, their vibrant colors shimmering beneath the floating candles.

“I told you I’d been busy.”

“Indeed,” he said, lifting one of the vials for closer inspection. It was a bottle of Murtlap Essence, a precise shade of yellow he immediately recognized.

“Oh, I made lots of that one.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her, sticking it back in the crate with the others. “Obviously.”

“You’re not bothered about the ingredients, are you?”

He huffed. “Don’t be absurd.”

Seating herself on a stool, she folded her hands in her lap. “Did I forget anything?”

“Pardon?”

“Is there anything else that might be needed?”

“Lily,” he said, his lips twitching with amusement. “You have it more than covered, I assure you.”

“Well, what should we make then? Something recreational?”

“Recreational?” He frowned.

“Just for fun, you know.”

“I see. What did you have in mind?”

She hesitated, her expression growing thoughtful. “What about Felix Felicis?”

“Six months to stew, remember?”

“That’s right. Damn.”

Severus scanned the shelf beside him, hoping one of the ingredients might provide a spark of inspiration. Unfortunately, most of the potions that could be considered “fun” were also quite juvenile. He didn’t think Lily would enjoy having her head replaced by a pumpkin or being shrunk down to a minuscule size. An aphrodisiac, perhaps? Not that they needed one, but...

Before he could finish the thought, he caught a slight shimmer out of the corner of his eye. The jar had been shoved into a corner, half hidden behind a stack of snake fangs. Holding his breath, he pulled it out, igniting the tip of his wand for a closer look. It was a thick, mucus

like substance, its color a sickly shade of green. There were only a few drops left, but maybe...

"I think we should try something new," he said as he strode over to the counter. "Something that's never been done before."

"You want to *invent* a potion?"

"Precisely."

She frowned, her expression curious as she moved to his side. "What will it do?"

"That," he said, withdrawing a handful of Dittany leaves as he reached for a knife, "remains to be seen."

---

Lily thoroughly enjoyed the day she spent with Severus in the lab. They worked together for several hours, heads bent low over the cauldron, forgetting all about the outside world as they coaxed the mysterious potion into being. He never explained its intended purpose, didn't allow her to touch the substance she referred to as his "secret ingredient." But she was able to help in other ways — chopping ingredients, stirring the mixture, watching it cycle through a vast array of colors.

And then at last, it turned a putrid shade of green. Severus lifted his head, letting out a hiss of satisfaction.

"Hand me a vial."

"No one would drink this. It smells disgusting!"

"It's not meant to be swallowed."

"Topical?"

He nodded, slipping the vial in his pocket before he set about the business of cleaning up. Soon enough, they were back in the passageway, her hand clasped in his as they made their way back to the Headmaster's quarters.

"You're still not going to tell me what it's for?"

"No."

"How do you know if it will work?"

"I don't."

"Well," she said, her forehead creasing into a frown as they emerged into their bedroom, "who is it for?"

"I don't know that either."

"Severus..."

Stopping in his tracks, he swooped down, pressing his lips to hers. His kiss was slow and deep, devouring the rest of her words before he pulled back with an expression of smug

satisfaction.

“Hungry?”

“What?” She blinked, thrown by the change of subject. “Oh, um, yes. But...”

“I’ll go see about dinner.”

In the end, she supposed it didn’t matter what they’d been brewing. She’d forgotten what a pleasure it was to watch him work, all fierce concentration and meticulous attention to detail. It made her wonder what his life might’ve been like if the war had never come. Would he have been locked up in a lab somewhere, devoting his time to experimentation and research? That would’ve suited him — a chance to let his talents flourish with as little interference as possible.

She shook her head, troubled by the direction of her thoughts. Why was she thinking about his life in the past tense, dwelling on what might’ve been? Why not turn her mind to the future, the endless possibilities that still lay before him?

But deep down, she knew why. Severus wasn’t exactly optimistic about his chances for survival — she’d known that for months. But the way he’d spoken to her before they’d entered the lab? That was something deeper than pessimism, much more than simply preparing for the worst. He wasn’t afraid he *might* die. No, he’d accepted it as fact.

Why?

But she already knew the answer to that question, too. Dumbledore. Who else?

Granted, Severus had never been one to look on the bright side, but to lose *any* hope of survival? That wasn’t like him... not unless he’d been convinced that sacrificing his life was unavoidable.

Clearly, Dumbledore had plans for him. But Lily had a plan of her own, a flash of inspiration she’d taken from the lab that day. Could she pull it off? She had no way of knowing, though she supposed there was only one way to find out.

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For the next three days, Lily searched for Charity, wandering the passages for hours on end. She checked all the usual spots, peered through every crack she could find. She even accepted Nick’s gallant offer of assistance, sending him to parts of the castle that were inaccessible to her. Unfortunately, he fared no better than she did, returning to her side with profuse apologies and a promise to try again on the morrow.

“Thank you, Nick,” she said, flashing him a weary smile.

She trudged back to the Headmaster’s quarters, slipping her shoes off as soon as she entered the study. Collapsing on the couch, she let her eyes drift closed, wondering what she was supposed to do if...

*Tired?*

Her eyes flew open, followed by a gasp as she spotted the cat. Charity was perched on the windowsill, letting out a huge yawn as she basked in the afternoon sunlight.

"I've been looking all over for you," Lily said as she heaved herself into a sitting position. "Where have you been?"

*Outside, mostly. Weather's been far too nice to stay cooped up all the time.*

"Yes, well, some of us don't have a choice."

*Sorry. Guess that was tactless of me.*

Lily sighed, struggling to ignore her irritation. Her moods were already precarious, not helped by aching feet and an empty belly. She was exhausted, too, not to mention terribly worried over Harry and Severus. Really, would it have killed Charity to let her know she'd be gone for a couple days? The last thing she'd needed was the additional stress of a missing cat.

Keeping these thoughts to herself, she summoned the platter of sandwiches Severus had left on the table. After a couple bites, she felt a little better, fixing herself a cup of tea before turning back to Charity.

"It's fine. I'm just a bit tired, as you said. Got a lot on my mind these days."

*Anything I can help with?* the cat responded as she joined her on the couch. *I know I can't do much, but...*

"Actually," Lily interrupted with a smile. "You might be the only one who *can* help."

She went on to explain what she needed, hoping it would require nothing more than a quick trip to the dungeons. Wildly optimistic, perhaps, but she was too exhausted to imagine what she might do if the object couldn't be found. She sent Charity off with a murmur of thanks, dozing on the couch as she awaited her return.

When she opened her eyes again, afternoon had melted into twilight, sunshine replaced by the soft glow of floating candles. She didn't know what had awoken her — not until she felt a gentle nudge against her palm. The cat was sitting on the floor beside her, round eyes giving off an eerie reflection beneath the candlelight.

"Did you get it?"

*Afraid not.*

"What happened?"

*Old bugger was in his office when I got there. Waited for over an hour, but he never came out.*

"That's okay," she said, struggling to hide her disappointment. "We can try again tomorrow."

*Sounds good.*

Lily waited for Charity to leave before she headed to the bathroom, shedding clothes as she went. Soon enough, she was lying in the tub, letting out a blissful sigh as the warm, fragrant water soothed the tension from her muscles. Only then did she turn her thoughts back to more serious matters, examining her plan from every possible angle.

It had to work. It just had to. This wasn't a matter of success or failure. No, it was the difference between life and death, her last, best chance to save the people she loved.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. The plan depended on several factors, after all, at least one of which was beyond her control.

First, she needed the item she'd sent Charity to retrieve. That was crucial.

Second, she'd have to be right in her suspicion that Dumbledore was concealing information. If everything he'd been saying was true, all her efforts would be for nothing.

Third, she'd have to proceed with extreme caution. She had to remember that her old headmaster was a brilliant manipulator, one of the most skillful liars the Wizarding world had ever known.

Fourth, she'd have to be a damn good liar herself. If she gave him the slightest reason to believe that it was all an act, the battle of wills would be lost before it had even begun.

Yes, Dumbledore would make for a fearsome opponent. There was no question of that. Indeed, that was why she needed all the luck she could get. It would be foolish to even consider proceeding without it.

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The next morning dawned cool and clear, the calendar on the wall informing her that it was April 30. For once, she rose before Severus did, waiting for him with a cup of coffee as he trudged into the study. If he found her behavior odd, he didn't mention it. Accepting the mug with a nod of thanks, he took a sip before brushing his lips against hers.

"I might be a bit late this evening."

"All right," she said, choosing not to point out that he was only stating the obvious. "Have a good day."

He'd already turned away, but there was no mistaking the snort he let out in response. Smiling to herself, she followed him to the door, laying a hand on his sleeve as he reached for the knob.

"Severus?"

"Hmmm?"

"I love you."

His harsh features softened, his arms wrapping around her as he kissed her for the second time. This one was much better than the first, warm and sweet, leaving a hint of strong black coffee on the tip of her tongue.

"You too," he said quietly. "Always."

As soon as he was gone, Lily settled down to wait. The minutes dragged by like hours, nearly a dozen books picked up only to be discarded. She managed to lose herself in cleaning for a while, followed by a bit of breakfast. By then, it was half past 10... less than an hour until the appointed time.

But 11 came and went, the clock seeming to speed up once she had reason to believe that something might be wrong. Rising to her feet, she paced the room, hoping to tire herself out. Instead, her restlessness grew more severe with every step, the walls of the study seeming to close in around her by slow degrees.

At 2:14, she finally gave up, jotting down a quick note before she headed for the bedroom. Pressing the tiny silver button, she slipped into the passage with a sigh of relief.

Yes, this was what she needed. A proper walk, not to mention some vague connection with the outside world. Of course, there was no one she could talk to — Nick was nowhere to be found. But she could hear voices from the other side of the wall, even caught a glimpse of Severus striding by. His expression was thunderous, black robes billowing around him as he stalked toward a pair of cowering students.

“Ten points from Hufflepuff! Yes, and may I remind you that shrinking hexes are in no way permitted...”

*Lily?*

“Charity!” She gasped, whipping her head around to look behind her.

The cat trotted forward, holding a glistening object in her mouth, Lily’s eyes widened, her breath catching in her throat as it was dropped into her open palm. Silently, she held it up to the light, tears spilling from her eyes as she recognized it for what it was.

“Felix Felicis,” she whispered. “I don’t know how you did it, but thank you.”

Carefully, she tucked the vial into her pocket, wondering if those few precious droplets could really be enough to give her the answers she needed. There was no way of knowing... not until she had the chance to speak with Dumbledore.

*When are you going to do it?* Charity asked.

Lily stared down at her, anxiety replaced by cold determination.

“Tonight.”

## 78. Throwing Down the Gauntlet

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### Chapter 78: Throwing Down the Gauntlet

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Lily lifted Severus's arm from her waist, holding her breath as she settled it beside him. Carefully, she slipped out of bed, wrapping herself in a heavy robe before she tiptoed to the door. She glanced over her shoulder, relieved to see that he hadn't stirred. His eyes were still closed, his expression peaceful, lips slightly parted in slumber.

Closing the door behind her, she hurried to the bathroom, cursing as she spotted her reflection.

She'd hoped the robe would be enough to hide her condition, but 22 weeks of pregnancy had clearly taken its toll. There was no denying that her breasts were larger, her belly an obvious protrusion beneath the layers of wool. Sighing, she cast a couple glamours, feeling a strange sense of loss as her body appeared to deflate. She turned away from the mirror, reassured by a series of gentle flutters from within.

Yes, it was a convincing disguise, but would it be enough to fool the portrait? What if he could see through glamours? What if...

And then she smiled, shaking her head as she hurried to the study. She picked up Severus's cloak and fastened it around her neck, her body safely concealed beneath billowing black fabric.

"Perfect."

From there, she made her way to the front door, her heart thrumming wildly as she reached into her pocket. She withdrew the vial, staring at the precious droplets before she lifted it to her lips.

It wasn't a full dose. Not even half of one. But it was *something*, at least, some small hope that her plan could actually work.

"Please," she whispered to no one in particular as she opened the door.

The Headmaster's office was silent save for the occasional soft snore. That was hardly surprising — it was well past two in the morning, the entire castle seeming to have fallen into a state of deep unconsciousness. Even Dumbledore's portrait slept soundly, his chin resting against his chest.

"Dumbledore," she called, startling herself with the sound of her voice. "Wake up."

At first, she thought he wasn't going to respond. But then she saw his painted foot twitch, followed by a subtle shift in his breathing. After a moment, he lifted his head, fixing her with an inquisitive stare.



“Good evening, Lily,” he said, his tone pleasant. “How have you been? I haven’t seen you since...”

“January.”

“Indeed. And what have you been up to? Keeping yourself occupied, I trust?”

“Oh yes,” she said, flashing him a smile. “Spending a lot of time on research these days.”

“Research?”

She nodded, taking a seat behind the desk. “Searching for a solution, you know. For Harry.”

“Lily,” Dumbledore said quietly. “We’ve already discussed this. There’s nothing you can do.”

“So you’ve said. But you also told me something else that night.”

“What’s that?”

“You said that nothing is impossible, remember? Well, I intend to prove it.”

Dumbledore’s expression shifted, caught somewhere between suspicion and pity. “Explain.”

Lily hesitated, knowing she’d come to a crucial moment. Part of her was tempted to just blurt it all out — admit that her research had come to nothing, beg Dumbledore to provide a solution. But this wasn’t the time to act on her Gryffindor impulses. No, she had to think like a Slytherin.

Straightening her back, she lifted her eyes to the portrait. “This plan of yours hinges on Severus, doesn’t it? He’ll have to tell Harry...”

“Severus knows what he needs to do.”

“Yes, but what if someone stops him? What if *I* stop him?”

“Lily, you can’t...”

“Oh, I could. All I’d have to do is Confund him. Oblivate him, maybe, or knock him unconscious. Draught of Living Death, perhaps?”

“Severus is a powerful wizard.”

“Yes.” She shrugged. “A powerful wizard who trusts me without question, who’d never suspect me of any sort of trickery. That gives me a certain advantage, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’d use that against him?” The portrait raised an eyebrow, his mouth turned down in disapproval.

Unable to help herself, she snorted. “You’re one to talk.”

“Lily...”

“To answer your question though, yes. If it meant saving my son’s life, I most certainly would.”

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry has a Horcrux inside him, Lily. As long as that Horcrux exists, Lord Voldemort cannot be killed. Your son will be hunted to the ends of the earth — sooner or later, he will be found. Whether he will die isn't the question. The only question we must ask ourselves is whether his death will be in vain."

"Did you ever have any children?"

"My students..."

"Children of your own."

"No, I'm afraid I never enjoyed that privilege."

"Then I wouldn't expect you to understand." Lily paused, choosing her words with care. "That night in Godric's Hollow... I had no reason to think I could save Harry's life. Why didn't I stand aside when You-Know-Who offered me the chance?"

"Because you were brave."

"No. All I did was act on instinct. If my death meant Harry could keep breathing, even for a few more seconds, then dying was the only thing to do."

"In this case, prolonging his life would only mean..."

"You don't get it," she interrupted. "I didn't care about the war that night, nor what his death or mine might mean. My baby was in danger — I had to do everything in my power to protect him."

"This is an entirely different situation."

"No," she said, looking up at the portrait with a sad smile. "It isn't."

"Harry is old enough..."

"He'll always be my child, which means I'll do whatever it takes to keep him alive. Days, hours, minutes, whatever I can manage. You cannot expect me to just sit back and watch him die."

"I see." Dumbledore fixed her with a piercing stare. "So you're willing to cost us this war, condemning thousands of innocent souls to a miserable fate, simply to buy Harry a little more time?"

"It's not that I *want*..."

"And what *about* Harry?" he continued. "Do you imagine he'd want to go on living at the cost of countless other lives? He'd hate himself for surviving, even as he'd despise you for condemning him to such a fate. Is that truly what you want?"

Dumbledore's tactics were effective. She had to give him that. But she had tactics of her own, which rendered her immune to his criticisms.

"It doesn't matter," she said quietly. "*Nothing* matters, as long as he survives."

Indeed, let the old man believe she had nothing else to lose.

Resisting the urge to cradle her stomach, Lily closed her eyes as she felt a gentle nudge from within. Severus might not know it yet, but he'd gotten his wish. A well-timed pregnancy as a means of saving her life?

Of course, he'd given up on that plan, and yet she couldn't deny that the end result was the same. Her condition made it impossible to hurl herself at certain death, too distraught to care about the consequences. She had another life to consider, after all, one that was wholly dependent on her for survival.

If Harry's was the only life at stake, she would've sacrificed herself without hesitation. But killing one of her children in an attempt to save the other? That she could never do. No... unless she managed to give birth while her son was still in hiding, it seemed that Dumbledore's fears were unfounded.

But of course, *Dumbledore* didn't know that. He had no idea it was all a bluff, that she was smiling on the inside even as her eyes filled with tears.

"I'm going to save him," she said fiercely. "He'll *never* receive that message from Severus — you can be sure of that. And even if he does? Well, I'll just have to do what I did before. I already know what it feels like to die, Dumbledore. I'm not afraid to do it again."

"You'd allow us to be defeated?"

"Yes."

"Plunge the Wizarding world into darkness?"

"For Harry's sake? I'll do what I must."

"I cannot allow you to..."

"I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter."

"When I speak to Severus..."

"Severus doesn't control me," she said, withdrawing her wand from her sleeve. "I make my *own* decisions, especially where my childre... child is concerned. If you think you can stop me..."

Dumbledore changed tactics, his tone gentle as he spoke again. "I'm simply asking you to be reasonable, Lily. Surely you don't want to spoil everything we've been working toward all these years?"

"Fine. Then tell me how I can save Harry *without* spoiling your plans."

"Impossible."

"There must be a way."

"It isn't that simple, Lily." Dumbledore sighed. "But if you'll just trust me... let things play out as they will..."

"You told me that before," she said, giving him a sharp look. "What does it mean?"

"That things will work out for the best."

She shook her head. "I need specifics. Tell me everything."

"You already have too much information. Indeed, far more than I ever intended to share."

"Tell me the rest."

"I cannot."

"So you expect me to trust you," she said bitterly, "yet you refuse to return the favor. Business as usual, I see."

The portrait sighed. "Whatever I have withheld, I've had good reason for doing so."

"I don't give a toss about your reasons. I want the *truth*."

"My secrecy, such as it is, is a necessary part of..."

"Either tell me everything you know or your plans are doomed to failure. It's as simple as that."

"You don't understand..."

"*Then make me understand!*" she shouted, slamming her fist on the desk. "Tell me why Severus is convinced he has to die, why my son..."

"If you love them," Dumbledore interrupted. "If you *truly* love them, you must not do this. I understand that you're distraught, Lily, but interfering with our plans will hurt them far more in the end."

"How?"

"If you'll just trust..."

"*Silencio!*"

Lily didn't expect the spell to work. It was no more than a reflex, an outward show of her frustration. But as she stared at the portrait, her eyes widened — his were wild with panic, his painted mouth opening and closing to no avail.

"Holy shit," she whispered as she lifted her wand again. "*Confundo?*"

His jaw went slack, his eyes suddenly hazy and unfocused.

To think that she could do anything she liked to the portrait, that he wouldn't be able to lift a finger to stop her? An intriguing thought, to say the least.

And yet there was something pitiful about him as he sat there, his expression utterly blank. Devoid of his sharp intelligence, the restless intensity that always put her on edge, he just looked old and tired.

This wasn't Dumbledore. No, this was just some pale facsimile, a mere fragment of the person he'd been in life. Granted, the living Dumbledore had taught his portrait well, imbuing it with a strength of will that made it hard to tell the difference. But at last, she'd seen through the facade.

She lifted the charms, letting out a heavy sigh as she lowered her wand to her side.

“Now,” she said quietly. “Let’s talk.”

The portrait was fully aware now, yet oddly subdued as he motioned for her to continue.

“What I want is the truth, which I intend to have. There’s nothing you can say to dissuade me. Understand?”

“Lily...”

“Also, you will not ask me to trust you,” she interrupted. “Not after everything I’ve witnessed over the past two decades.”

“Whatever you believe, it was never my intention...”

“I was there from the start, you know. The night you dumped Harry off on my sister? I was right there beside him.”

The portrait frowned. “How did you...?”

“Poor Harry... left out in the cold all night, abandoned to those who were incapable of giving him the love and care he needed. But you knew that, didn’t you? You *wanted* him to suffer, to be humbled. Why? Because you knew it would be that much easier to bend him to your will.”

“The Blood Protection...”

“*Silencio*,” she said, giving her wand a casual flick. “As I was saying, you used him. Showed him kindness, but only so you could manipulate him through his gratitude.”

The portrait shook his head, staring at her with pleading eyes.

“Manipulation,” she said firmly. “That’s what you do when you move people around like pieces on a chessboard, withholding so much information that they don’t even understand what it is you’ve asked them to do. You exploit their vulnerabilities, their weaknesses...”

She heard a shuffle from behind, surprised as she glanced at the other portraits. They were all awake, staring at her with wide, expectant eyes.

“But you know,” she said as she turned back to Dumbledore. “That isn’t even the worst part. The worst part is that you give them hope. You make them believe it’ll all turn out for the best, that they’ll achieve everything they set out to do. But you and I both know that isn’t the case, don’t we? You just string them along with your secrets and lies, making sure they never discover the truth. Not until the very end, when it’s much too late to turn back.”

Dumbledore rose to his feet, gesturing frantically. After a moment, she sighed, canceling the spell that kept him silent.

“I’m not a monster,” he said, his voice strained. “I never meant for their sacrifices to be in vain, nor did I manipulate them to the degree that you suggest I did. Oh, I’ll admit that Harry couldn’t have known what to expect, but Severus? That’s another matter entirely.”

“How?”

“Severus understood what the stakes were when he entered my service. He knew there’d be a great deal of unpleasantness involved, that there was a good chance he wouldn’t survive

this war. He accepted those terms.”

“Because he wanted to avenge my death. To redeem himself.”

Dumbledore nodded.

“And yet you never bothered to tell him that I’d survived.”

“Your spirit hadn’t crossed over. That was all I knew. I had no idea where you were, what form you’d taken, nor if you’d ever return. What would’ve been the point in...”

“Relieving his guilt? Giving him reason to hope? Not letting him serve you under false pretenses?”

“I had to know I could trust him. Too much depended on his loyalty.”

“I should hate you,” Lily said, her voice quiet. “In some ways, I do. More than that though, I *pity* you. Thinking you had to deceive, manipulate, that you couldn’t even trust...”

“I *did* trust...”

“No, you didn’t. You trusted that certain factors would make them do what you wanted. Harry’s loneliness, his need for acceptance. Severus’s grief and remorse. Your willingness to trust them only if those conditions were met? That isn’t trust. It’s a tragedy. You want to know why?”

Dumbledore sighed, motioning for her to continue.

“Because they would’ve been loyal to you either way. You never had to trick them into giving you what you wanted. They would’ve done it freely if you’d offered them the chance.”

“You may be right,” he said, his expression melancholy as he stared off into the distance. ‘But again, it isn’t that simple. For this plan to succeed, there are things they cannot know.’ Lily tried to speak, but he held up a hand to stop her. “No, wait. Let me finish. It isn’t because I don’t trust them. After everything, I’d be a fool not to. But all of this is a delicate balance. You don’t know...”

“Then tell me,” she shot back. “You say they can’t know? Fine. But why can’t I?”

“I’d like to, Lily. Truly, I would. But it would be too much of a risk.”

She sighed, burying her head in her hands. They’d made slight progress, but she couldn’t sit there all night pulling the truth out of him by slow degrees. She was pregnant, after all, a fact that had never been more obvious to her than it was just then. Weariness and hunger could be tolerated. An increasingly urgent need to visit the bathroom? Not so much.

“Okay,” she said, shifting in her chair in an effort to ease her discomfort. “Here’s my final offer.”

“Go on.”

“Tell me what you know. *All* of it.”

“I’ve already said that I cannot. It would be...”

“Too much of a risk. Yeah, I got that. But think about what *else* it would mean. A chance to prove that you regret the way you’ve treated them, to make amends for the damage you’ve done. You’ve made mistakes, Dumbledore — surely you must realize that.”

“Whatever I’ve done...”

“Do things differently this time. Prove you can trust someone other than yourself.”

“And if I refuse?”

She hesitated, closing her eyes against a rush of disappointment. “Then I’ll just have to force it out of you.”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I most certainly would,” she said softly. “Shall I take out my wand and prove it?”

“If you’re that willing to strike out against me, why waste your time on persuasive tactics? Why not just take what you want?”

“Because I’d rather you tell me willingly. I can’t say what I’ll do with the information, but giving it to me freely means there’s a chance we can negotiate. It would restore some small measure of trust, which we will not have if...”

“Very well,” he interrupted. “I accept your offer. However, I do have certain conditions.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course you do.”

“It was you who suggested that we negotiate.”

With a brief nod, she conceded the point. “What are your conditions?”

“First, neither Severus or Harry can know what I’m about to tell you. That is crucial.”

“If knowing will save their lives...”

“Trust me, it won’t.”

“Okay,” she said, choosing not to argue now that she was finally getting somewhere.

“Second, there’s another secret I wish you to keep.”

“What would that be?”

“Severus,” he said, and for the first time, she saw something genuinely sad in his eyes. “You haven’t told him, have you?”

“That you knew I’d survived?”

Dumbledore inclined his head.

“No. Unlike you, I try to spare him as much unnecessary pain as possible.”

“Yes, well...” He paused, his mouth twisting into a grimace. “I must ask you to keep our secret. No good could come from revealing it, especially at this late date.”

“Agreed.”

For a moment, he sat silent, staring off into the distance. And then Lily knew — he *did* regret the things he'd done, at least to some degree. Did that make them forgivable? Perhaps not, and yet she had to admit that this glimpse of humanity was reassuring. As if... well, maybe he wasn't *quite* the monster she'd made him out to be.

"Anything else?" she said, her voice a touch more gentle.

Abruptly, his expression changed. "Tell me what happened to you," he said, eyes burning with curiosity. "How did you survive? Where were you for all those years?"

"I'll answer your questions, but not until I've had the truth from you."

"Fair enough." He took a deep breath. "Harry has a Horcrux inside him. There's no way to remove it without taking his life."

"But..."

"But that doesn't mean I ever intended for him to die, Lily. Not in the way you think."

She stared at him, stunned. "I don't understand."

"On the night you sacrificed yourself, we learned something crucial. Lord Voldemort *does* have a weakness... one I've always planned to use to our advantage."

"What's that?" she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Dumbledore smiled. "Love."

"Love?"

"For all his gifts, he's never understood what love is, nor how powerful it can be. If Harry chooses to use that power, his sacrifice will be no different than yours. Voldemort's curse will destroy the final Horcrux before it rebounds on him, killing him outright."

She shook her head. "But Harry will die, too. Just like I did."

"Just like you... and yet you're sitting right in front of me. How is that possible?"

"Because someone wanted to protect me," she said, careful not to give away too much. "So much that he begged You-Know-Who to spare my life."

"Severus."

"Yes."

"He found the means to save you, even if he didn't do so directly."

She smiled. "I suppose he did."

"Well," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "There you have your answer. You were protected by outside factors, a power Lord Voldemort did not possess. Well, the same will be true for Harry."

Lily hesitated, hope at war with lingering suspicion. Dumbledore certainly had a talent for telling people what they *wanted* to hear, yet she had to admit that his words had a distinct ring of truth. Voldemort *did* have blind spots, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Hadn't she learned



that for herself all those years ago? She'd never forget the tone in his voice when she'd refused to step aside — exasperated, yes, but also genuinely surprised.

Love.

Voldemort had never understood it, but *she* did. It was love that had saved her infant son's life, somehow preserving her own in the process. Love was the reason she'd been restored to her humanity — where would she be now if Severus hadn't fought so hard to bring her back?

No, she couldn't bring herself to question love's power. Not when it had already saved precious lives, offering hope and countless second chances.

"Okay," she said quietly. "But what about the Horcrux?"

"That's the part that will truly be killed before the spell rebounds, rendering its caster as mortal. Ideal timing, wouldn't you say?"

"*That's* why you don't want Harry to know, isn't it? It isn't that he has to die... he just needs to *believe*..."

Dumbledore nodded. "And for Severus to convince him, he'll have to believe it, too. It has to be a true sacrifice."

"Like mine."

"Precisely. He has to be willing to give up everything, no matter the cost to himself."

"And that will protect him?"

"I'm certain of it."

"I... I don't know what to say."

"This isn't what I wanted, Lily," Dumbledore said, his voice gentle. "Truly, it isn't. But Harry was already a target — there was nothing I could do to change that."

"I know."

"But I tried to give him every possible advantage. I made sure that cruelty taught him kindness, that the weaknesses of others challenged him to find the strength in himself. As for your sister's neglect, I can only say that Harry learned how precious love is, to never take it for granted. And I do believe that love, the love he cherishes so much, will be his salvation."

Lily nodded, pressing a hand to her mouth.

"So again, I must ask you to let things play out as they will. This is his chance to strike back against the darkness, to free himself from the threat of Lord Voldemort for good. Will you give him that chance?"

"Yes," she said, her voice choked. "Of course I will. I... I'm just sorry I ever doubted you. Sorry I..."

"Don't be," he said kindly. "Your suspicions were perfectly understandable."

"So Harry will survive."

"That is the plan."

“What about Severus?”

Dumbledore shrugged. “Severus’s fate is entirely up to him. I have no control over the outcome.”

She frowned. “So you never told him he had to sacrifice himself, or...”

“No.”

“Then why is he so convinced that he’s going to die?”

“Well,” Dumbledore said, his expression thoughtful. “I imagine that was part of the original plan.”

“I thought the plan was to protect Harry.”

“Oh, it was. But for Severus, I believe it was something deeper. He was... sick with grief. Desperate for redemption. I don’t think he had any intention of surviving this war — on the contrary, I believe he spent many years praying he would not.”

“He can’t possibly *want* to die,” she said quietly. “Not now.”

“No, but perhaps he’s spent so long *expecting* such an outcome that he’s afraid to hope for anything else.”

“What can I do to change that?”

“Very little, I’m afraid.” Dumbledore paused, letting out a heavy sigh. “Above all things, Severus is a practical man. He knows his position is... tenuous, to say the least. One side wants him dead, while the other would finish him off without a second thought if he revealed his true allegiance. Not the most encouraging situation, especially for a man who’s used to anticipating the worst.”

“He’s made it this far,” she pointed out.

“True enough, but there are greater challenges he has yet to face.”

“The message for Harry?”

“Indeed. It will be extremely difficult pass it along without blowing his cover.”

“But why does it have to be him? Why can’t someone else do it?”

“Despite your earlier assumptions,” Dumbledore said with a smile, “I *do* trust Severus. More than anyone else alive. Who else could I trust with such an important task?”

“Me?” Lily asked, though she knew what the response would be.

Dumbledore shook his head. “You cannot take the risk of revealing yourself. Not only would you be endangering your own life, but Harry’s and Severus’s, too.”

“If I could reach him without being seen...”

“A mother he doesn’t remember, one who’s supposedly been dead for all these years?”

“You’re right,” she said. “I could disguise myself, but...”

“But this isn’t the kind of information Harry is likely to accept from a stranger.”

“No, I guess not.”

“Which leaves us with Severus,” Dumbledore said gently. “We must put our faith in him.”

With that, he leaned back in his chair, his expression one of quiet satisfaction. Had he found comfort in unburdening himself? Or was he just relieved that she was finally subdued? It had indeed been a harrowing conversation, leaving her to wonder why he’d been so reluctant to tell the truth. Surely he must’ve known that she wouldn’t interfere — not when there was already a plan in place to save Harry’s life.

This was the first of many questions she still had, but in the end, she was simply too tired to ask them. Another night, perhaps?

“Well,” she said, reaching up to stifle a yawn as she rose to her feet. “I suppose I’ll say good night.”

She was halfway across the room when she heard him clear his throat.

“The third condition,” he said, sounding faintly amused. “Remember?”

“Oh, right.” She’d nearly forgotten, probably because it had taken so long to drag the truth out of *him*.

“How did you survive? Tell me.”

“When You-Know-Who cast the Killing Curse, he also...”

“Yes?”

*Think like a Slytherin, Lily.*

The thought came from out of nowhere, surprising her with its intensity.

“Well, nevermind,” she said, flashing him a smile. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“You agreed...”

“I agreed to tell you, yes. Never said I’d do it tonight.

“I’ve been waiting almost...”

“20 years? Yes, well, a little longer won’t hurt.”

Perhaps it was cruel, but she couldn’t help feeling smug. How many people had been driven half mad by his secrecy, often when it wasn’t even necessary for him to conceal the truth? It was about time someone turned the tables on him, showed him what it felt like to be left in the dark.

Of course, she’d tell him soon enough. She’d agreed, after all, and she supposed he deserved it after he’d been so forthcoming with her. But just for tonight... well, it was nice to feel like she had the upper hand.

“Lily?”

She glanced back over her shoulder. “Yes?”

“Before you go, would you mind silencing me one more time?”

“What?”

“Just... indulge me, if you will.”

Shrugging, she pointed her wand in his direction. “*Silencio*.”

“Come, Lily. You’ll have to try harder than that.”

She frowned, taking a step closer. “*Silencio!*”

“Ah, that was a nice one.”

“Why won’t it...” And then her eyes went wide. “You were *faking!*”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Why?”

He smiled, blue eyes twinkling. “I suppose you’ll have to figure that out for yourself.”

Puzzling, though in the end, she didn’t have it in her to care. She ducked behind the tapestry and rushed to the bathroom, groaning in near ecstasy as she finally relieved herself. Only then did she strip away her robes and remove the glamours, slipping into a loose nightgown before she turned to face the mirror again.

Her eyes widened as she caught sight of her reflection. Gone was the worry in her eyes, the faint lines around her mouth she’d come to believe were permanent. Her face was totally relaxed, with a faint flush of color in her cheeks and a small smile curving her lips.

Maybe Severus wasn’t lying when he said she was still beautiful. She certainly felt that way now, full of love and hope and overwhelming relief.

Granted, there were no guarantees, but neither Harry or Severus were destined to die. She truly believed that now, though deep down, she supposed she had all along. No matter what she’d seen in her lifetime, everything she’d suffered and lost along the way, she’d never stopped believing that good would triumph in the end. Realistic or not, she simply couldn’t fathom the alternative.

As for Dumbledore, she still hadn’t forgiven him. But her anger was beginning to dissipate, replaced by a grudging sort of acceptance. Perhaps after all, he really *had* done the best he could.

Was that enough to excuse his actions? Maybe not. But if her loved ones managed to defeat Voldemort with their lives intact, she’d be more than willing to put the past behind them.

“All right?” Severus mumbled as she slipped under the covers.

“Never better. Go back to sleep, love.”

He did as he was told, burying his face in her neck as she reached up to stroke his hair. Unable to close her own eyes, she watched shadows dance across the ceiling, darkness gradually giving way to gentle morning light.

How much longer would it be? Not long, no doubt, though for the first time, she wasn’t afraid. It wasn’t too late... not for her or Severus, and not for Harry either. Whatever

happened, she was ready to deal with it, put on a brave face and do whatever it took to make it to the other side.

And that was fortunate, really. She couldn't have known it, but the final reckoning would come before the next sunrise.

## 79. The Eve of Battle

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### Chapter 79: The Eve of Battle

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Severus tapped on his desk for another pot of coffee, though there was little point in doing so. No amount of caffeine could alleviate his exhaustion, his eyes bleary as he glanced up at the clock.

Of course, there was no point to that either. It didn't matter how late it was, nor that he'd been awake since well before dawn. He couldn't retire until he'd gotten through his paperwork, a heaping pile of bulletins, correspondence, and other minutiae that had accumulated throughout the day.

Fucking Slughorn. If he hadn't been obligated to cover the old fool's classes, he might've finished hours ago. But then again, wasn't that always the way of it? Why should anyone handle their own responsibilities when they could just dump them off on him?

The thought made him scowl, though there was no real venom behind it. The truth was, he'd rather enjoyed teaching Potions that day, amused by the students' gasps as he'd swept into the classroom in a billow of black robes. He'd found comfort in old habits, a sense of belonging in the rows of empty cauldrons. Granted, the faces that peered back at him might've been filled with dislike, but even then, he'd embraced the familiarity. Those faces were a reminder of years gone by, a simpler time when the world was relatively at peace.

Naturally, he'd kept these sentiments to himself, smirking as he'd assigned an array of ridiculously long essays.

"Today is May 1. I will have them on my desk no later than 7 PM on May 3. Unless..."

"Sir, we can't possibly..."

"*Unless*," he'd repeated, "you wish to serve detention with me next Saturday."

Indeed, he'd set them up for failure... or at least, he hoped so. The threat of punishment might send more of them into hiding, but even if it didn't, detention would still keep them away from the Carrows for a few hours. They'd hate him for it, of course, but which was worse? An evening of scrubbing cauldrons? Or yet another trip to the Hospital Wing?

"Sir?"

"What?" he'd snapped.

"Do you want us to start now, or..."

Of course, he'd known what the student meant to ask. Class was for brewing, after all, while essays were generally reserved for homework. But when he glanced down at the syllabus, he couldn't help but sneer. *Fungiface* Potion? What kind of bloody fool would be assigning *novelty* potions at a time like this?

Then again, why did Flitwick continue to teach Cheering Charms? Why were Minerva's student still turning rodents into teapots? Why did almost every professor at Hogwarts insist on sticking to their original curriculum, as if they had all the time in the world to teach frivolities?

Normalcy.

It was that simple, really, the need to find comfort in a familiar routine. Hadn't Severus felt it himself when he'd entered his old classroom, part of him longing to pretend that all was well?

But he couldn't do it. Not for himself, and not for the children's sake either. Perhaps he wasn't quite the monster they thought he was, but he'd never been the type to coddle them. Certainly not to their own detriment.

"Star Grass Salve," he'd barked. "That is what you'll be creating today."

"But Professor Snape..."

"*Headmaster!*"

"Headmaster Snape," the girl corrected, her voice trembling. "We've already learned that one."

"Then I trust that you won't screw it up. Indeed, I should hope not. The consequences would be severe."

The class sat silent, staring at him with wide eyes.

"Consequences," he repeated, his voice low. "In the real world, potions aren't just useless concoctions to be turned in at the end of class. They heal wounds, cure poisons, staunch blood or even replenish it should the need arise. Potions can save lives... or at the very least, help to relieve an unimaginable amount of pain. You'll learn this for yourselves soon enough..."

He'd paused, lips curving into a malicious smile.

"And I'll be the one to teach you."

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Exhausted or not, Severus felt proud of what he'd accomplished. The students had brewed their potions flawlessly, pocketing them at the end of class with stern instructions to carry them on their person at all times.

"You *will* be tested," he'd told them, taking his wand out and twirling it between his fingers. "The question is, will you be prepared when the time comes?"

Contrary to popular belief, he didn't enjoy threatening students. Nonetheless, he'd welcomed the fear in their eyes, content to let them believe he might lash out at any moment. That meant they'd be on their guard, with at least one remedy at their disposal should they find themselves in *real* danger. Pain potions, blood replenishers and curse removals, treatments for wounds and antidotes to poisons... each class had received a different assignment, another possible way to save a life.

Of course, he hoped it wouldn't come to that. But if it did...

"It's late, Severus. What are you working on?"

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Preparation for exams."

"You still intend to hold them?" Dumbledore said. "Under the circumstances..."

"Under the circumstances, *I* am headmaster. I'll do as I see fit."

"Indeed, though I hardly see the point..."

The portrait trailed off, cocking his head as if listening for something in the distance. Rising to his feet, he jerked on the handle of a painted door, disappearing from the frame for what seemed like an eternity.

"Severus..." he hissed, eyes wild as he sank back into his chair. "We have a visitor."

"What?"

"Harry Potter is here."

For a second, Severus thought he might black out. How long had he been waiting to hear those words? A lifetime it seemed, yet now that he had, he could hardly bear to face the reality of what they meant. War. Calamity. Death. His own death, most likely, but how many would join him?

More importantly, how many could he *save*?

That was the thought that spurred him into motion, an image of Lily hovering behind his eyes as he reached in his pocket. Withdrawing a small sack of potions, he selected a couple vials, dosing himself for strength and stamina as he rose to his feet.

"All right," he said, nerves fairly thrumming with the need to move. "Tell me what to do."

"You must keep your cover intact," Dumbledore said, his voice low with intensity. "Do not reveal your true allegiance until the last possible moment."

"Obviously."

"This isn't the time for sarcasm, Severus."

He shrugged. "Anything else?"

"All the other Horcruxes must be destroyed. That has to be done *before* he faces Lord Voldemort. You'll need to buy him as much time as possible, and you'll *have* to tell him..."

"I know."

"I cannot tell you when or how it should be done, but you must find a way. You *must*, Severus, no matter what it takes."

"Don't worry," he said, pausing to swallow the last of his coffee. "I have a plan."

Of course, he couldn't say whether the plan would *work*, but it was the best he'd been able to come up with. It all hinged on the diadem — not the original that Lily had helped him destroy, but the replica he'd left in the Room of Hidden Things. He'd stashed it beneath a pile



of bedding, counting on a long and frustrating search to give him the time he needed to reach the boy.

Indeed, that part would be easy enough. Getting Harry to listen? Damn near impossible, though at least they'd be safe from prying eyes while he attempted it.

"There's something else," Dumbledore said, his voice quiet.

"Tell me."

"I believe Harry's presence will have a certain effect on the students. Most likely the staff as well."

"You expect them to rise against me?"

Dumbledore inclined his head.

"As do I," Severus said, "which means I'll need to..."

"Let them cast you out. Leave in disgrace."

"If I remain in the castle, I'll be better positioned..."

"Stay here and your master will expect you to give him access. What will happen when you ignore his commands?"

"*He's not my master!*" Severus snapped. "And yes, I know very well what he'll *expect*. But if he has reason to believe I'm injured, Confunded, or otherwise incapable of responding to his call, I might be able to..."

"I'm sorry, my boy," Dumbledore said gently, "but you must play your part. He has to believe you're his most faithful servant, that he can trust you above all others. We cannot give him even the slightest reason to doubt your allegiance. Severus, you know that."

Indeed, he *did* know. It was the original plan, after all, and if circumstances had been different, he would've followed it without complaint. But now that he had Lily to consider, not to mention their child... how could he bring himself to leave them behind?

"I'm not asking you to abandon our cause," the portrait continued, as if sensing the direction of his thoughts. "Nor anything else that you hold dear. But you can serve much more effectively from behind enemy lines. If Harry is captured, you'll be the first to know. You might have the power to intervene if something goes wrong. That's what you wanted, isn't it? To protect Lily's son?"

Severus grunted, acknowledging the point.

"Only now, the stakes are even higher. If Harry should fail..."

"He won't."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm glad to hear it."

"And the school?"

"Well, I believe your ousting will provide a rallying point. Severus Snape, the most fearsome Death Eater in existence, cast out like so much rubbish? I can already hear the

shouts of triumph.”

“Sounds delightful.”

Dumbledore’s lips twitched. “All a matter of perspective, my boy.”

They lapsed into silence, the portrait’s expression growing more serious as Severus made to depart. Despite the urgency of the situation, he paused to check his pockets one last time, his movements almost leisurely as he fastened his cloak.

“Severus...”

Slowly, he lifted his eyes to the portrait.

“I want you to know...” Dumbledore trailed off, giving his head a little shake. “That is, whatever happens tonight, please remember that I truly appreciate... that I never meant...”

“I know.”

Dumbledore nodded, shoulders sagging in relief. “As for Lily...”

“She’s already agreed to go into hiding.”

“Good. She should be kept as far from the conflict as possible.”

“That,” Severus said as he strode over to the tapestry, “I most certainly agree with.”

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The door to the Headmaster’s quarters flew open, followed by swift footsteps in the hall. Lily rose to her feet as Severus swept into the study, her mouth falling open at the sight of his expression.

“What...”

“We have to go. *Now*.”

With that, he was out the door again, hurrying toward the bedroom. Trailing in his wake, she watched with wide eyes as he snatched a dress from the wardrobe.

“Put this on. Shoes, too, and a cloak. Quickly.”

“Has You-Know-Who come back?”

He chuckled, a harsh, bitter sound that echoed off the walls. “Oh, he’ll be here soon enough.”

“Shit.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Quietly, she stepped into the dress, slipping the straps over her shoulders. It was tighter than she remembered, her breasts and belly straining against the thin fabric. She’d never felt more exposed, though judging by the way Severus was pacing the room, she doubted she had time to change.

“Here,” he said, pausing to drape a voluminous cloak over her shoulders as she sighed in relief. “And take these, too.”

“Potions?”

Nodding briefly, he stuffed the sack in her pocket. “Plenty of Polyjuice, among other things. I want you to disguise yourself, Lily. The one you showed me, yes?”

Taking her hand without waiting for a response, he led her to the tiny button next to the front door. Soon enough, they were hurrying along the passageway, no time for a word or even a breath before they’d reached their destination.

Abruptly, Severus spun on his heel, gripping her by the shoulders.

“Promise me,” he said, his voice low. “Promise you’ll stay here, no matter what happens. And I want... I want you to remember what I told you that day we visited the lab. I love you, Lily. Promise you won’t blame yourself, that you’ll never...” He trailed off, his throat working convulsively.

Only then did she understand what was happening. This wasn’t like last time, a surprise visit on an otherwise peaceful night. No, this was something bigger. She could hear it in the tremble of Severus’s voice, his hands shaking ever so slightly as he clung to her like a lifeline.

Promise me...

It was his eyes that begged her now, dark and desperate, his breath coming in short, panicked bursts.

Lily didn’t want to lie to him, but how could she bring herself to tell him the truth? What he needed was comfort, the reassurance that she’d be safe. That was the only thing that would allow him to focus on his own safety, which might very well mean the difference between survival and death.

“I promise,” she said softly. “I swear I’ll stay in that room until you tell me otherwise.”

“I’m not sure how... that is, I don’t know if I...”

Holding out her hand, she showed him the coin that was resting in her palm.

“You brought it?” he said, his voice choked.

“Of course.”

“Yes, well, I’ll make sure...”

Without warning, he swept her into his arms, his mouth devouring hers. The kiss seemed to go on forever, hard and hungry, his hands running greedily over her body as he pressed her against the wall. Parting the folds of her cloak, he tugged at the hem of her dress, sliding it up her thighs and over her belly.

“Severus,” she whispered, shivering as the cool air danced across her skin. Surely he wasn’t going to... *now?*

But just as she decided she wasn’t going to stop him, he dropped to his knees, pressing his face against her bare stomach. And then she felt it — a slight hitch in his breathing. He pulled

back just a little, enough for her to watch the single tear as it slid down her belly and fell to the floor.

“Oh, Severus...”

“What is it?” he said, his voice hoarse.

“I thought you didn’t want...”

“I have to know.”

“It’s a girl.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, responding with a jerky nod. “Don’t... don’t name her after my mother.”

“All right,” she said quietly.

“Or that wretched sister of yours.”

“Never.”

“Provisions have been made for you both.”

“Severus...”

“I have to go.” He rose to his feet, the anguish in his expression replaced by steely determination. “Goodbye, Lily.”

Before she could respond, he spun on his heel, a billow of black robes receding into the distance. She watched him until he disappeared, letting out a shaky breath as she turned her attention to herself. Her skirt was still pushed up over her stomach, a faint trail of dampness shimmering beneath the torchlight.

Only then did she allow herself to cry, unleashing the tears she’d managed to hide from Severus. She wept until she had nothing left to give, no longer finding comfort in Dumbledore’s assurances. No, maybe Severus didn’t have to die, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t. And what about Harry? He might have special protections when the time came, but what if he was forced to face Voldemort too soon? What if Severus wasn’t able to pass along the information?

Resolutely, she pushed the thought away, withdrawing a vial of Polyjuice from her pocket. She downed it in one swallow, groaning softly as her body transformed. Giving herself a minute to adjust, she applied the glamours Minerva had taught her, conjuring a small mirror to make sure that everything was in order.

“I need a room that Voldemort and his followers cannot enter.”

The room was larger now, filled with dozens of hammocks rather than the handful she remembered. She glanced around as she stepped inside, surprised to see that the number of students had nearly tripled since her last visit.

“Who the hell are you?” demanded one of the newer girls as she pulled out her wand. “How did you get in here?”

“Calm down,” said an older boy, reaching out to push her arm down. “We told you about her, remember? That’s Felicity Burbage. Neville says...”

Lily’s eyes widened, spotting a familiar figure on the other side of the room. “Harry...”

“That’s right,” the boy in front of her said, his voice dripping with pride. “That’s our own Harry Potter.”

Really, it was fortunate that her son had developed such a reputation. No one seemed to think twice about her reaction, her breath coming faster as she made her way toward him.

“Harry,” she whispered. “My god...”

He looked older, certainly much thinner than he’d appeared in Severus’s memories. But he was *here*. After all these years, she could finally tell him the truth.

Abruptly, she stopped in her tracks. No, she couldn’t. Even if he could afford the distraction just now, there were dozens of people around. She was also in disguise, which made it highly unlikely that he’d believe her. Maybe if she had a Pensieve, but even then...

No. However much it pained her, the truth would simply have to wait.

Harry didn’t seem to notice as she drew closer, his attention focused on Neville Longbottom. The other boy was talking intently, gesturing with his hands as Harry slowly shook his head.

“H-Harry?” she whispered. “Harry Potter?”

He turned around, gazing at her through familiar green eyes. “Hi. Do I know you?”

“Sort of. I’m...”

“She’s the one who gave me the message,” Neville said, flashing her a distracted smile.

Lily nodded. “I’m sorry I had to be so cryptic, but I was worried about it falling into the wrong hands.”

“That’s okay.” Harry squinted, his expression bewildered. “Who are you? You look familiar.”

“Felicity Burbage,” Neville said. “Professor Burbage’s sister.”

“Oh, right. Do you work for the Order?”

“You might say that,” Lily responded, doing her best to sound reassuring. “Neville, could you let me talk to Harry for a minute? In private?”

He laughed. “Not much privacy here, but I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you.” She waited for him to step away before turning her attention back to Harry. “*Muffliato*.”

Harry fidgeted awkwardly, glancing over her shoulder at his friends. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t have much time to talk. I have to...”

“Did you understand my message?”

"Well, I understand what it *could've* meant. But that's impossible."

"Why?"

"I can't say. Look, I should really..."

She reached out, laying a hand on his arm. "You need to destroy a Horcrux, yes?"

"I... I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you do," she said gently. "Three are already gone. Four if you've gotten rid of the cup. That leaves the snake and one other, which you've come here to find."

His eyes went wide. "How do you..."

"Dumbledore."

"*Dumbledore?*" Harry frowned. "But he said... that is, he never told anyone else. Said that I was the only one who..."

"You destroyed the locket," she said, watching him closely. "Four months ago in the Forest of Dean. It was a Patronus that showed you the way. She led you to a frozen pool, which is where you found the sword."

"That was *your* Patronus?" Harry whispered.

She nodded, reminding herself that technically, it was true.

"Can you... I'm sorry, but can you prove it?"

Lily smiled. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

The doe burst from the tip of her wand, circling around Harry before it bounded across the room. He watched it disappear and then turned back to her, his eyes filled with tears.

"You're the one who helped me. It was you!"

"It was..." She hesitated, struggling for composure. "There are plenty of people on your side, Harry. Some you might've never expected. As for me... yes, I'd like to help you. That's why I'm here."

"Thanks," Harry said quietly. "*Really*. But there's another... Horcrux, one I still haven't found. I have to..."

"It's already been destroyed."

"What? How do you know?"

"Because I was there. Remember that day you found the sword? Before it was delivered, I..."

"If you destroyed it," he interrupted, his expression eager. "Then you knew what it was. I mean, not that it was a Horcrux. You obviously knew that. What I mean is..."

"You don't know what object it was hidden in?"

Slowly, he shook his head. "I figured it had to be another Founder's Object. Something from Ravenclaw, maybe?"

“Yes, Harry.” She smiled. “The lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw.”

“Diadem?”

“Like a little crown.”

He hesitated, his expression thoughtful. “You didn’t happen to find it in the Room of Hidden Things, did you?”

“I did.”

“Was it sitting on a little statue? An ugly statue that was also wearing a wig?”

She nodded.

“It was right there,” he muttered to himself. “Right there in front of me, and I didn’t even realize...”

“You couldn’t have known.”

“So you’re telling me it’s gone? Really gone? You’re *sure*?”

“Yes, Harry. It’s gone.”

“Right,” he said, looking stunned. “Well, I... I guess I better go see about the cup then.”

---

He needed to find the boy. That was Severus’s first thought, one that had him prowling the castle from top to bottom. Of course, he knew Harry would be headed for the Room of Requirement, but that wasn’t particularly helpful. How had he managed to get inside in the first place? A secret passage, no doubt, though certainly not one he was aware of.

“What are you doing out and about?” he snapped as a pair of Hufflepuff girls appeared at the other end of the hall.

“Nothing, Headmaster,” said the older girl. “Just taking a walk.”

“Get back to your Common Room. *Now*.”

They hurried to obey, but not before he saw a flash of rebellion in their eyes.

So they knew. Bloody fantastic. And what about the teachers? If so, they’d be doing everything in their power to secure Harry’s position. That wouldn’t work out too well for Severus, who was no doubt at the top of their list of supposed threats. How was he supposed to...

“Severus!”

He turned on his heel, his blood turning to ice. There was no need to ask — one look at Minerva’s face told him all he needed to know. Her eyes were bright with excitement, her chest heaving as she strode toward him. Reflexively, he curled his fingers around his wand, prepared to defend himself should the need arise.

“I didn’t know it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You have some objection?”

"I wonder what could have brought you out of your bed at this late hour?"

"I thought I heard a disturbance."

"Really?" he said, stepping closer. "But all seems calm."

Not that he expected her to tell the truth, but he had to find the boy. If he couldn't reach him, couldn't pass along that crucial bit of information before he was forced to vacate the castle... well, the consequences didn't bear thinking.

"Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva?" he murmured, staring deep into her eyes. "Because if you have, I must insist..."

There it was. Something vague, a slight flicker...

Abruptly, Minerva broke eye contact, slashing her wand through the air. Severus tossed up a Shield Charm, his own wand at the ready as he shifted into a dueling stance. He'd known it would come to this, hadn't dared to hope for anything else. Nothing to do but suffer through it.

But then Minerva did a strange thing. She let out a huff, lowering her wand to her side.

"Bloody hell, Severus. I'm not going to hurt you!"

"What?"

"I'm not going to hurt you," she repeated, her eyes blazing. "But I'll not have you rummaging around in my head either, you nosy git. Yes, Harry is in the castle. He came in through the Hog's Head, which has a passage that leads to the Room of Requirement."

What the hell? Why was she telling him this?

"The Room of Requirement... is that where he is?"

"Yes," she said. "He's safe for now, which is why I've come to find you."

"Indeed?" Severus sucked in a deep breath, his body tensing.

She nodded. "What would you like us to do? How can we help?"

"Pardon?"

"From what I understand, You-Know-Who will be arriving soon. Do you want to prepare the defenses yourself, or shall I do it?"

"And why, precisely, would I want to keep him *out*?"

"Well," she said casually as she tucked her wand in her sleeve, "I'd imagine you'd want to keep him as far away from Lily as possible. I know you have plenty of other reasons, but I'd expect the woman who's carrying your child is an important one."

Severus let out a choking noise, reaching out to steady himself against the wall.

"You'll also want to protect Harry, I'm sure, just as you've been doing for the past 17 years. And then there's the students, which I believe you care about more than you've ever let on. Perhaps the teachers, too? I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but..."



“How long?” Severus interrupted, his voice emerging as a harsh rasp.

“How long have I known?”

He jerked his head.

“Since November.”

“You caught her?”

Minerva shrugged. “I think she wanted to be found.”

“Late November?” he asked, his voice low.

“I believe so. It was right before I watched over the school for a few days.”

“I see.”

Severus leaned his head back, letting out a shuddering sigh as the pieces fell into place. That must’ve been the night he’d been tortured, the same night she’d discovered the truth about Harry. Of course she’d gone to someone else. What else could be expected when the only person she’d trusted had betrayed her?

That betrayal had been an act of compassion on his part, but it didn’t matter. The end result was the same. In that moment, she’d needed someone, *anyone* other than him.

It wasn’t a pleasant thought, but memories of their reconciliation were enough to soften the blow. No, he couldn’t blame her for what she’d done... though he feared what the consequences might be.

“Who else?” he questioned, staring at Minerva intently. “Who else knows the truth?”

“Well, there’s Charity.”

He scowled. “I know about the bloody cat. *Who else?*”

“No one. That is, not until tonight.”

“Explain.”

“Well,” she said, refusing to meet his eyes. “I promised Lily I wouldn’t tell. Not a soul. But when I found out that Harry was in the castle...”

“What did you do, Minerva?” he said impatiently.

“I passed along some memories to Filius. As for the others, I couldn’t do more than send my Patronus. I don’t know if that will be enough, but...”

“And did you stop, even for a minute, to think about the consequences of your actions? Bloody hell...” He shook his head, running a hand through his hair. “There are reasons that all of this was kept quiet. Reasons why I’ve allowed myself to be branded as a traitor for the better part of a year. If *anyone*...”

“Yes,” she interrupted, “there are reasons that all of this has been done in secret, all of which lead back to Albus. His refusal to trust anyone, to give us a chance to help. Don’t make the same mistake, Severus.”

“Apparently,” he said dryly. “I don’t have much choice.”

Minerva shrugged. “You could Oblivate me. I’m sure it would be easy to convince the others that I’d been Imperiused, that you manipulated my memories.”

“You wouldn’t attempt to stop me?”

“No, Severus. But before you decide, let me assure you that I’ll keep your secret. I think it’s safe to say the others will, too.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“We owe you that much.”

“You don’t...”

“Besides, we’ll do whatever it takes to win this war. To protect our families, our students, our entire way of life. If you’re in a position to help us do that, as Albus seemed to believe...”

“All right,” he said, holding up a hand to stop her. “Point taken.”

“Go ahead then. Oblivate me.”

Severus hesitated, giving her a long, measuring look. “No,” he said quietly. “No, I don’t think I will.”

## 80. Strengthening Bonds

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### Chapter 80: Strengthening Bonds

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Severus opened his mouth and then closed it again, overwhelmed by a multitude of questions. He didn't have time for a proper interrogation, however, choosing instead to focus on his most pressing concern.

"How much do you know?"

Minerva shrugged. "Just about everything, I'd say."

"*Everything*? And what does that entail?"

"I know what happened to Lily and how you brought her back, that the two of you... well, I suppose that part isn't important."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Go on."

"She told me you switched sides in an attempt to save her life. Believing you'd failed, you swore to protect Harry instead." Minerva paused, giving him an inscrutable look. "I must say, that part was truly surprising. You really *did* seem to hate him — I never would've suspected it was all an act."

"It wasn't."

"No?" The disapproval in her voice was obvious.

"Not completely."

"But why? Not because of James, surely."

Severus hesitated, glad that the name of his former nemesis no longer made him flinch. "It was... rather more complicated than that. At any rate, it doesn't matter. I agreed to protect the boy, which I have done to the best of my ability. I was never required to harbor any particular fondness for him — indeed, it was better that I didn't."

"But circumstances have changed, haven't they? I'm sure that Lily..."

He held up a hand to stop her. "We don't have time to discuss it, even if I were so inclined. Now tell me what else you know."

Surprisingly, Minerva didn't press the issue. She touched his arm instead, her voice gentle as she spoke again. "I know you didn't murder Albus. Lily showed me what really happened."

"Pensieve?"

She nodded. "I couldn't believe it. Tricking you into it like that, leaving you with no other choice... and then to let the whole world believe you were a *traitor*..."

This time, Severus *did* flinch. He recovered quickly, responding with a shrug. "Dumbledore did what he felt was necessary, just as I have. What else?"

"Hmm. Well, I know about the Horcruxes."

"You know about the Hor..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Foolish woman."

"Pardon me?"

"Not you. Lily."

"Well, Severus, as long as you're referring to people as 'foolish', you might want to start with yourself."

"Indeed?" He raised an eyebrow at her. "And why is that?"

"If I have to tell you, you really *are* a fool."

He huffed, though he didn't take her comments personally. On the contrary, he'd always enjoyed sparring with her when there was no malice behind it. "If you're referring to Lily's... condition..."

"We're in the middle of a war, in case you hadn't noticed."

He shrugged. "One does not always plan for these things."

"In the Muggle world, perhaps not. But a wizard has no excuse... especially when that wizard happens to be a Potions Master."

"Yes, well..." He trailed off, his head snapping up at the sound of footsteps.

"What's happening?" Flitwick called as he hurried toward them. Professor Sprout was close on his heels, clutching her wand with dirt stained fingers.

"Harry and his friends are safe in the Room of Requirement," Minerva replied. "I've contacted the Order — they should be arriving any minute now."

"And the defenses?"

"We'll see to them shortly."

"Very good." Flitwick said before turning his attention to Severus. "Evening, Headmaster."

"Good evening," Severus said stiffly, forcing himself to meet Flitwick's eyes. To his surprise, he found no judgment there, not even the slightest hint of fear. In their place was... bloody hell, the man almost looked *smug*.

"I knew it all along," Flitwick said. "Murder Dumbledore? Psh! I always figured there had to be more to the story."

"You did not," Pomona said under her breath. "All the times you've called him a gutless..."

"Nevermind about that. I knew it, I'll tell you."

Severus felt his lips twitch. "Indeed?"

"Oh, yes. I knew it from the minute you Stunned me."

"Knocking you unconscious was a point in my... favor?"

"If you'd been like the others," Flitwick said, "you would've killed me on the spot. Instead, you did everything you could to keep me out of harm's way. Rather clever, the way you..."

Severus cleared his throat. "Yes, well, this is hardly the time for reminiscing. The three of you have preparations to make."

"Aren't you going to help us?" Unlike Minerva and Flitwick, Pomona still looked suspicious, keeping a safe distance as she fiddled with her wand.

"Yes," Severus said, his voice low. "I'll assist you in whatever ways I can. However, I do not have the luxury of doing so openly."

"Oh, really? Then how do you expect us to believe..."

"Severus is a spy, Pomona," Minerva interrupted. "The three of us might know his true allegiance, but it would not do..."

"Four," said a familiar voice from behind.

"Thank you, Horace. As I was saying, Severus will need to maintain his cover. He can't..." She trailed off, her eyes narrowing. "Bloody hell."

"Headmaster Snape!" Amycus called, striding toward them with his wand extended. "We've been looking all over for you."

"Indeed?" Severus said, cocking an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

Alecto was just behind her brother, her expression positively gleeful. "Heard that Harry Potter is about. Seems he found a way to sneak into the school."

Severus nodded. "I've heard the same. Just a rumor, no doubt, though I intend on searching the castle just to be sure. Now as I was saying, Minerva, I'd like you to check Gryffindor tower. As for you, Filius..."

"What are you asking them for?" Alecto said with a scowl. "Even if they do find him, you'll never hear of it."

"Headmaster Snape has given us orders," Minerva said stiffly. "It's our duty to obey."

"Oh yeah? Want to know what I think, you addled old bint?"

"Somehow, I don't think you have the capacity to do much thinking at all."

Amycus struck first, jabbing his wand with a shout of, "*Crucio!*"

Minerva deflected the spell, her wand zipping through the air in a smooth, intricate motion. Streaks of fire burst from the tip, the smell of burning fabric hanging heavy in the air as Amycus unleashed a hellish scream. The damage was minimal — Alecto hit him with a spurt of water before turning her attention to Minerva.

“You’ll pay for that, bitch.”

“Will I?” Minerva said, her lips twitching. “Well, let’s have it then.”

The other professors hovered just behind, gripping their wands with white knuckled fingers as they prepared to join the fray. Severus knew then that he didn’t have the option of standing aside. He’d have to choose one side or the other, a decision he’d have to make quickly.

If he aligned himself with the Carrows, would the others realize that he was merely defending himself rather than striking out against them? Surely they would, but what if the Carrows noticed, too? Granted, they were none too bright, but wouldn’t it be obvious that he was trying to shield his supposed enemies from harm?

Perhaps he could pull it off. He *was* rather clever, after all. But...

Swerving aside, he avoided a flurry of spells as the dual began in earnest. And then he felt it — the presence of a shield as it was cast in front of him. He didn’t know who’d done it, but it couldn’t have been either of the Carrows.

Yes, he had a decision to make. But in the end, it was an easy one.

Flinging himself in front of Pomona, he bared his teeth at Alecto. “*Sectumsempra!*”

Blood sprayed across the hallway, followed by a horrible choking sound as Alecto toppled over. She twitched once and lay still, uttering a single word with her last, gasping breath.

“Traitor.”

Severus stared at her, stunned. He hadn’t meant to attack her so viciously, only to stop her from harming the others. But it seemed he’d underestimated the force of his anger, the silent, helpless fury that had been building inside him ever since the Carrows had come to Hogwarts.

He waited to feel... *something*. Shame, remorse, any of the emotions he might’ve expected upon taking a life. Instead, there was only quiet satisfaction. No more torture, no more acts of cruelty he’d be powerless to prevent. Indeed, it was comforting to know that his actions, while unintended, had been justified.

“*Traitor!*” Amycus screamed, picking up his sister’s accusation. “I’ll kill you for this! *Avada...*”

Individually, the spells could’ve been deflected, but the combination was lethal. A ring of fire, a spray of daggers, a suit of armor brought to life, along with a profusion of twisting vines that shot up from the floor. Slughorn cast a full body bind, though it was too late to make any difference. Amycus was already down, bloodied, scorched, and tattered, sprawled out across his sister’s corpse.

“Is he dead?”

“Yes, Horace. I believe so.” Minerva stepped forward, using her wand to flip Amycus onto his back. His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, mouth twisted in a permanent expression of agony.

“Good,” Pomona said fiercely. And then she turned to Severus, the outrage in her expression replaced by shame. “I’m sorry, Severus. I should’ve never doubted you.”

He shrugged. “I gave you ample reason to do so.”

“Still, I should’ve known. I should have...”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, shifting uncomfortably.

“It does. What you did...”

“Pomona,” Flitwick interrupted. “We have preparations to make.”

“Gather the students in the Great Hall,” Severus said, shooting him a grateful look. “Employ as many defenses as you can, though do keep in mind that they won’t hold forever. A few hours is the best we can hope for.”

“We’ll evacuate any students who are underage,” Minerva added. “As for the others... we’ll leave that choice to them.”

Severus inclined his head. “And I’ll leave these matters to you.”

There was a murmur of protest as he made to depart, followed by well wishes and reminders to be careful. It still seemed strange, almost unreal, but he knew they meant every word.

He cast a Disillusionment Charm, still feeling Minerva’s gentle hand on his arm as he slipped up the stairs. Pomona’s apology echoed in his ears, followed by Flitwick’s astute observation that Severus had sought to protect him on the night he’d killed Dumbledore. He might’ve brushed these comments off, but deep down, he cherished them.

No matter what happened, he’d always be grateful to Lily for telling Minerva the truth. She’d given him the gift of acceptance, of forgiveness and understanding, none of which he’d dared to hope for in these final hours.

Most of all, she’d offered him a taste of redemption, his singular craving for what seemed like a lifetime. He’d nearly given up on that dream, believing that his name would always be tarnished. Traitor. Murderer. Death Eater. Indeed, he’d played his part well... how could the Wizarding world ever see him as anything else?

He’d been wrong. He could see that now, though the knowledge was bittersweet. After all, the specter of death had been easier to face when he’d assumed that the only alternative was a permanent residence in Azkaban. He hadn’t allowed himself to imagine the future he would’ve wanted — his name cleared, followed by decades of peace.

But as much as he’d tried to kill the hope within himself, Lily had refused to let it die. She’d kept it alive with the strength of her love, reviving it all over again through the child they’d conceived. And when that wasn’t enough, she’d shown him that others were willing to stand with him, too. That was the final push, as sharp and sudden as a dagger through the heart. He knew now that his name would be redeemed, even if he wouldn’t be alive to see it.

Severus ducked into the passage, sharpening his focus as he headed toward the Room of Requirement. A peculiar feeling settled over him then, the sensation that time was speeding up. Each heartbeat, every footstep, each and every breath... they were finite now, leaving him

to wonder which would be his last. He wanted to make the most of them, yet there was no ignoring the truth. There was nothing left save for the fire that loomed before him — everything he'd ever wanted was already on the other side of the flames.

Could he make it through alive? Probably not. But he damn sure intended to try.

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Lounging in a hammock seemed bizarre, but there wasn't much else that Lily could do. She'd been dozing off and on, hating how useless she felt, yet knowing it'd be good to rest while she still had the chance. She was already exhausted — between her meeting with Dumbledore the night before and a long day in the lab, there'd been little time for sleep.

Reaching in her pocket, she pulled out another vial of Polyjuice, downing it in one swallow. The effects weren't as bad when she overlapped her doses, insides writhing for just a few short seconds before the sensation let up. She grimaced, pressing a hand to her stomach as the baby gave a sharp kick.

"Are you all right?"

She jumped, opening her eyes to find Molly Weasley gazing down at her.

"Fine," she said, managing a casual smile. "Just something for my indigestion."

Molly nodded, glancing over her shoulder at the others. They were clustered around the room in small groups, a low, continuous murmur of voices discussing strategy while speculating as to when the battle might begin. Lily had introduced herself to most of the Order members, wanting to make sure she was recognized as an ally. Beyond that, she'd chosen to keep her distance, distracted by thoughts of Harry and Severus as she'd awaited further news.

"Ah, yes. Had it with most of my pregnancies, too."

"Oh, I'm not..."

No offense, dear, "Molly said," but I could've spotted it from a mile away."

Was it that obvious, even in disguise? Lily glanced down at her body, which seemed relatively shapeless beneath her cloak.

"Granted, you carry it well, but... may I?"

Before she could think of a polite refusal, Molly placed both hands on her stomach. The touch was probing yet gentle, pressing down on curves and indentations.

"If I were to guess, I'd say you're about six months along."

"Five and a half."

Molly nodded. "Probably not your first then."

"Second," Lily admitted, reminding herself not to reveal too much.

"I see. And where is..."



Just then, the door swung open to reveal a familiar figure, almost as if he'd been summoned by sheer curiosity. Lily stared hungrily at her son, forgetting Molly as the other woman strode away to join her family.

"Harry, what's happening?" said Remus, his brow furrowed with concern.

"Voldemort's on his way. They're barricading the school. No one knows where Snape is." Harry paused, taking a minute to catch his breath. "What are you doing here? How did you know?"

Of course, Lily already knew the answer to that. She'd seen how rapidly word had spread among the DA, who'd gathered in the Room of Requirement before contacting the Order. Following that, it had been a matter of minutes before the adults had arrived.

"They're evacuating the younger kids," Harry said a few minutes later, his voice calm. "Everyone's meeting in the Great Hall to get organized. We're fighting."

In response, there was a tumult of cheering, the walls seeming to shake as dozens of people moved forward.

Lily rose to her feet, torn with indecision. On one hand, there was the promise she'd made Severus, not to mention the need to protect their unborn child. On the other... well, it was hard to ignore the excitement thrumming through her veins, coupled with an almost painful longing to defend those she loved.

Quietly, she waited, watching the room empty out as she agonized over her decision. She saw several small dramas unfold, most of which involved the Weasley family. Percy Weasley appeared from out of nowhere, prompting a loud, tearful reunion. Of course, that wasn't half as loud as Ginny's furious shouts when her mother insisted on sending her home.

"Molly, how about this?" said Remus. "Why doesn't Ginny stay here? Then at least she'll be on the scene and know what's going on, but she won't be in the middle of the fighting."

Lily resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Remus might have had the best of intentions, but if he thought the girl was going to stay put...

"That's a good idea," Arthur said, though Molly looked dubious. "Ginny, you stay in this room, you hear me?"

"She'll need someone to stay with her," Lily said before she could stop herself. Too late, she recognized her mistake, cringing as Molly turned to her with a brilliant smile.

"Felicia — that was your name, wasn't it? I'm sorry, but with all the commotion around here, I'm afraid I didn't quite catch..."

"Felicity Burbage."

"Felicity. Yes, of course." Molly fidgeted, obviously anxious to be on her way. "You'll stay here with Ginny then?"

"I don't think..."

"It's a perfect solution, really. Ginny won't have to sit here by herself, and... well, you shouldn't be fighting, dear. Not in your condition."

Lily opened her mouth, ready to argue the point. But then she understood why she'd spoken up in the first place. It was natural, instinctual, the empathy she'd felt for a mother who desperately wanted to protect her child. She could help Molly do that, couldn't she? Not only that, but she'd be protecting her own offspring as well.

Her eyes shifted to Harry, just as he glanced back at Ginny with a look of concern. Yes, he needed her, too. It would help him to know that the girl was safe, allowing him to focus on the impending battle.

"Come on then," Lily said gently, taking Ginny by the shoulders and leading her over to a couch. She came grudgingly, but she came nonetheless, earning a murmur of thanks from Molly as she and Harry slipped out of the room.

"I don't get it," Ginny grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest. "16, 17... what's the big deal? My birthday's in three months, you know."

"August?"

"The 11th."

"That's close to Harry's, right? I remember reading that he was born at the end of July."

"The 31st." Ginny seemed pleased by the reminder, though she still looked disgruntled. "Anyway, what's the difference between now and then? Am I going to be a different person when I turn 17? Know all sorts of things I don't already know?"

"Not really."

"So why won't they let me fight?"

"Because they still have the power to stop you."

"Right, that's what makes it so unfair. I'm in the DA too, you know. I can fight just as well as the rest of them."

"I'm sure you can," Lily said gently.

"Then how about letting me go? I swear I'll be careful."

"I'd like to, Ginny. Really, I would. But I already promised your mum."

Ginny frowned. "I didn't hear you make any promises."

"You wouldn't have," Lily said with a smile. "Words aren't always necessary, especially when one mother communicates with another. You'll understand that for yourself if you ever have children of your own."

"I don't think I'd mind having children." Ginny hesitated, her cheeks turning pink. "Especially if I could do it with Harry."

"Ah... well, no need to rush into these things."

"So you've got kids? How many?"

"Two."

"Where are they?"

The girl was too much like her mother, though Lily couldn't bring herself to mind. It was a distraction for them both, easing the tension of what seemed like an endless wait.

"One is... my son is at school right now."

"Here at Hogwarts?" Ginny frowned. "What's his name?"

"And the other," Lily said hastily, "is right here."

Parting the folds of her cloak, she revealed her stomach. The protrusion wasn't as obvious thanks to her disguise, but without the cloak to conceal her, there was no denying that she was pregnant. The dress that Severus had chosen for her was far too tight, accentuating the contours of her belly.

"Oh wow," Ginny said, staring at it in fascination. "I had no idea."

Lily smiled. "Your mother did."

"Do you know Tonks? She just had a baby."

"I remember hearing about that. A boy, wasn't it?"

Ginny nodded. "Teddy. I got to see him right after he was born, but I wasn't around when she was pregnant. I've always wondered what it felt like."

"Which part?"

"Just... all of it. What it's like to have a baby growing inside you, how it feels when it moves."

From out of nowhere, Lily felt a series of flutters, as if her unborn child was eager to satisfy Ginny's curiosity. It was an absurd notion, yet she chose to believe it as she reached for the girl's hand. She placed it just below her navel, chuckling as the baby responded with a strong kick.

Ginny's eyes went wide. "Does it hurt?"

"Not in the second trimester, which is where I'm at right now. Gets a bit uncomfortable during the third, but even that... no, I wouldn't call it painful." Lily paused for a moment, recalling her first pregnancy. "Of course, when it's ready to come out, that's another matter entirely."

"Guess that's the bad part, huh?"

She grimaced. "You have no idea."

"When are you supposed to have it?"

"August."

"Close to my birthday," Ginny said with a smile. "Harry's, too."

Lily nodded. "For all we know, it might even happen on the same day."

"Really? That would be neat. I don't know anyone who shares a birthday with me."

She'd done the calculations countless times, though of course, she hadn't done so with Ginny's birthday in mind. It was likely that she'd be giving birth around the middle of August, but if she went into labor just a couple weeks early...

Would she *want* to deliver on July 31? She wasn't sure, though she had to admit that the thought intrigued her. 18 years to the day... what were the odds of that?

"Well, one can't plan for these things," she told Ginny. "But there's always a chance..."

She trailed off, her head snapping up as the door flew open. Hastily, she covered herself with her cloak, watching as an onslaught of students filed into the room. They headed toward the large portrait on the opposite wall, disappearing into the tunnel that lay beyond.

"They're going to Hogsmeade," Ginny whispered. "That passage there leads straight out through the Hog's Head."

Lily nodded, giving Ginny's arm a squeeze. She liked that the girl was leaning so close, a clear sign that she was comfortable in her presence. Whether she'd still feel that way after learning the truth? That remained to be seen.

"Tonks!" Ginny squealed. She leapt up from the couch, practically flinging herself at the pretty young woman.

For once, Lily didn't have to pretend to be a stranger. Other than the occasional sighting at Grimmauld Place, she knew nothing of Tonks aside from the bits and pieces Severus had shared. She was married to Remus, apparently, a union that Severus had deemed "repulsive" before referring to her child as "werewolf spawn."

Tonks seemed friendly enough, though their introduction was cut short by another arrival. This woman sealed the passage behind her, tucking her wand in her sleeve as she strode across the room.

"Where's my grandson?" she asked Ginny.

"Neville's gone to fight, Ms. Longbottom."

"Good. Very good." Turning to Lily, she fixed her with an inquisitive stare. "Burbage?"

"Yes, I'm Felicity Burbage. Charity's sister."

"Impossible. She never had a sister."

Lily cleared her throat, struggling to ignore her rising panic. "You must be mistaken. Our mother..."

"Perdita Burbage is one of my dearest friends," Mrs. Longbottom interrupted. "Has been ever since we were girls. Do you really think I would've failed to notice if..."

Thankfully, Harry chose that exact moment to return. Giving Lily one last, sharp look, the woman rose to her feet, hurrying across the room to greet him.

"Ah, Potter. You can tell us what's going on."

Lily wanted to stay and listen, but there was no ignoring the ache in her breasts, followed by a slight itching sensation at the tip of her nose. Ducking into the bathroom, she tipped back

another vial of Polyjuice, scrutinizing her appearance in the mirror before taking a moment to relieve herself.

It was a good thing she didn't hesitate. She'd barely had a chance to flush before she heard Harry's voice from the other side of the wall.

"Ginny, I'm sorry, but we need you to leave, too. Just for a bit. Then you can come back in." He paused, catching sight of Lily as she emerged from the bathroom. "You too, Miss Burbage. Please."

But even as she made to leave, he touched her arm, giving his head a little shake. Silently, they watched the others depart before he spoke again.

"Where did you leave it?"

"What?" She blinked, startled by his urgency.

"The diadem. You said you destroyed the Horcrux, right? I need to know where to find the rest."

"I did destroy it, Harry. I swear..."

"It's not that I don't believe you, but I have to be sure. You understand that, right? If I don't check, and this all goes wrong..."

"We made a replica, which we stuffed under a pile of bedding in the Room of Hidden Things. You'll be able to find it in the far left corner. As for the original, I have no idea what happened to it. There wasn't much left."

"We?" he echoed, and too late, she recognized her mistake.

"I... hired a jeweler to make a copy. Never told him what it was for."

"But if you destroyed the Horcrux, wouldn't you know where you left the pieces? Seems like the kind of thing you'd remember."

Damn.

"I wasn't supposed to tell you this," she said quietly, "but someone *did* help me get rid of the Horcrux. We used the Sword of Gryffindor, which was delivered to you later that day. I'm sorry I can't reveal the identity of that person, but Dumbledore insisted that it should remain a secret."

She hadn't realized how much power the former headmaster had over her son. As soon as she spoke the name, Harry's expression changed, suspicion giving way to a weary sort of acceptance.

"All right," he said, letting out a heavy sigh. "I don't suppose you could ask this other person to show you..."

"I would, but I don't know where he is. No one does."

"Right, well, I guess I better go then."

Unable to help herself, she swept him into a hug, her eyes filling with tears. He didn't resist, giving her a clumsy pat before she released him.

“Be careful, Harry. Please.”

If he thought her behavior unusual, he didn't show it, flashing her a brief smile as he headed back up the stairs. Of course, he'd been subjected to any number of tearful embraces over the past couple hours. Hers must've seemed no different than the rest.

Lily sniffled, wiping her eyes as she stepped into the hallway. Only then did she realize that Ginny had run off, though there was little time to dwell on that. The foundations of the castle were trembling, clouds of dust obscuring her vision as she flattened herself against the wall. She heard shouts in the distance, an unmistakable cry of, “*Avada Kedavra*” ringing out above the rest.

Of course, she knew what *Severus* would want her to do. Retreat without delay, whether that meant returning to the Room of Requirement or slipping into one of her passages. She could even go back to the Headmaster's quarters, an idea that was far more tempting than she liked to admit. After all, those quarters had been her sanctuary for the better part of a year, shielding her from even the slightest threat of danger.

But the temptation was fleeting, no more than a memory by the time she drew her next breath. She pushed away from the wall, her footsteps tentative as she moved toward the commotion.

Yes, she knew what *Severus* would want... just as she knew it was the one thing she could not give him. She'd already spent a lifetime in hiding, from those endless months in Godric's Hollow to more than a dozen years trapped in animal form. Even when her humanity had been restored, she'd been forced to conceal herself, no choice but to wait until...

Until now.

This was the moment she'd waited for, perhaps the only chance she'd ever have to fight for those she loved.

Of course, she'd be risking death if she took that chance... but somehow, she knew she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't.

## 81. The Power of Intervention

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### Chapter 81: The Power of Intervention

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Severus made several attempts to enter the Room of Requirement before he recognized the flaw in his plan. It seemed that after all, the room could only serve one purpose at a time. He hadn't been certain, though unfortunately, he'd never found the time to perform a test. It was one of those things he'd kept putting off, promising himself that he'd see about it on the morrow.

Well, it seemed his "tomorrows" had run out. Nothing to do now but make the best of the situation, while hoping that Lily was still inside the occupied room.

Lily... yes, that was definitely a complication. The boy would have no choice but to empty the room before he'd be able to search for the diadem. That would leave her exposed, however briefly, with no guarantee that she'd be able to enter the room again.

What would she do? Duck into one of the passages, return to the Headmaster's quarters, perhaps? The latter would be the safest option, of course, but would she take it?

True, she'd made him a promise, but he knew her too well to take much comfort in it. This was Lily, after all — when had she ever been content to sit idly by when danger was about?

Severus shook his head, making another attempt to enter the room. He focused all his energy on the place he wished to access, grunting in frustration when the wall remained blank.

Fuck. He couldn't stand out here all night. Granted, The Dark Lord hadn't attempted to summon him yet, but judging by the mild yet persistent burning in his forearm, it was only a matter of time.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" he said aloud, only to gasp as a small object brushed against his leg.

Charity. In the midst of all the upheaval, he'd forgotten the bloody cat. How was that possible? And more importantly, what could she do to help?

"Is Lily still in the Room of Requirement?"

If the cat was bothered by his brusque tone, she showed no sign of it. She merely bobbed her head, settling back on her haunches as she awaited further instructions.

"Very good, though she'll have no choice but to clear out soon. I'll need you to..."

*"I know that you are preparing to fight,"* rang out a high, cold voice in the distance. *"Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me..."*

"Fuck," he muttered.

*“Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and...”*

“Yes, yes,” he said impatiently. “We get the bloody point.”

*“You have until midnight.”*

Reaching inside his robes, Severus withdrew a watch from his frock coat. 45 minutes? Well, he supposed it could’ve been worse, though it still seemed like an impossibly short amount of time. Reaching Harry? That was already proving problematic. Getting him to listen? Severus still couldn’t imagine how he was supposed to pull that off.

Still, he had to try. What choice did he have?

“I want you to find him,” he told Charity. “The boy, that is. I need to know what his intentions are. Also, keep an eye out for Lily. If she leaves the room, I’ll want to know where she is, whether she’s safe. Can you manage that?”

As an afterthought, he added a “please”, but the cat was already off, bounding away on soundless feet.

Following that, there was nothing to do but wait. He paced the narrow confines of the passage, fighting the urge to check his watch as the minutes slowly ticked away.

He was just about to test the door again when it happened — an ominous rumbling on the other side of the wall, overlaid by the sound of distant shouting. He found a crack and peered through, feeling a twinge of envy as a group of Order members ran by. Several older students were close on their heels, waving their wands like banners at a Quidditch game.

His fingers twitched toward his own wand, though of course, it was no more than a foolish impulse. He’d known all along that his actions could never be so overt. He had to rely on subtlety, careful calculation — indeed, his role in this battle required far more skill than simply tossing out a few curses.

Fair enough, though that didn’t mean he wouldn’t have loved to...

He lost his train of thought as the cat appeared, waiting with bated breath for her to reach his side.

“Well?” he demanded, before remembering that her options for communication were rather limited. “Did you find him?”

Charity nodded.

“Is he in the Room of Hidden Things? No? Well, was he headed that way?”

Another nod.

“Very good. And how about Lily? Did you see her? Where is she?”

At the last question, the cat gave him a helpless look. Shaking his head, he let out a sigh, attempting to collect his thoughts.

“Is she safe?”



At Charity's response, his body relaxed. "Good," he said. "Go back to her, if you will. Let her know I'm fine, that everything is going according to plan. And... tell her to remember her promise. Remind her to stay safe."

He waited for the cat to disappear and then turned back to the wall, pacing in front of it with quick, measured steps. When the door finally materialized, he was so grateful that he could've fallen to his knees and wept. Instead, he cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, taking a deep breath as he slipped into the room.

It didn't take him long to hear their voices — distant, slightly muffled, yet easy to understand. He concealed himself behind a stack of broken cauldrons, gathering as much information as possible as he debated on how to proceed.

"If it's already been destroyed," said Weasley, "then why bother looking for it?"

"I've got to be sure, Ron."

"Well, why would she lie?" said another voice, though it took Severus a minute to realize it was Hermione Granger. She sounded far more mature than he remembered, without that shrill, imperious tone that had once put his teeth on edge.

"Beats me," Weasley replied. "Not even sure who she is, to tell you the truth."

"She told Harry she was Professor Burbage's sister. Anyway, she wouldn't have been able to get into the room in the first place if she wasn't on our side, right?"

"I'm not saying she lied," Harry said. "Just that she might've been mistaken. You know how hard it is to destroy one of these things. If she didn't finish the job..."

"I don't know, Harry," Granger interrupted. "From what you said, she seemed to know an awful lot about Horcruxes. It was her Patronus that led you to the sword, wasn't it? The one she showed you?"

Severus smirked. *Clever, Lily. Very clever.*

"Yeah, but..." Harry hesitated, letting out a heavy sigh. "I just... I've got to see for myself, all right?"

"Right, mate," Weasley said cheerfully, followed by Granger's more grudging agreement.

From the sound of their voices, Severus knew they were in the far back corner. Lily must've told Harry that the replica was hidden there, but would that be enough to convince him? Probably not. The boy was as stubborn as his mother.

This was his moment, Severus realized, perhaps the only one he'd ever have. Why was he lingering in the shadows, wasting time that had long since run out?

Because the scene was bound to be unpleasant. Really, it was as simple as that. Now that his own resentments had softened, soothed by time and distance, he had to admit that he wasn't looking forward to seeing that inevitable hatred in the boy's eyes. Indeed, it was hard to remember a time when he'd felt the same,

Shaking his head, Severus slipped out of his hiding place, creeping down one pathway and then another until he found a suitable vantage point. It was several yards behind the trio,

leaving him plenty of open space to defend himself should the need arise.

“Well?” Granger prompted as Harry scrounged beneath the bedding. “Is it there?”

“I don’t know, Hermione. Give me a minute.”

Severus wished he could make himself appear less threatening, shaking off the sinister demeanor that had been a constant throughout his life. Instead, all he could do was force his body to relax, rearranging his features into the mildest expression he could manage. He lowered both arms to his sides, keeping his wand concealed within the folds of his robe.

Holding his breath, he stepped forward, dropping the Disillusionment Charm.

They didn’t see him.

He shuffled his feet, not surprised that the noises went unnoticed. Granger and Weasley were too busy watching their companion, who was half buried beneath a mountainous pile of bedding.

Well, if he’d hoped to catch the boy at a disadvantage, he couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity.

“Potter,” he said, his voice low.

In response, there was a shrill scream, followed by a shout of alarm. Two jets of light flew toward Severus — he blocked them effortlessly, responding with a couple of lightning swift spells of his own. With that, Weasley and the girl were securely bound. One last spell, and they were blissfully silenced as well.

Harry pushed himself to his feet, glancing at his friends before he turned his attention to Severus. As soon as their eyes met, he froze, no hint of movement aside from a slight twitching in his jaw.

“I didn’t harm them,” Severus said hastily, taking advantage of the boy’s momentary shock. “And I will not harm you. I simply wish to deliver a message — an urgent message — from Dumbledore.”

Too late, he recognized his mistake. Harry’s eyes narrowed, his hand shaking as he whipped out his wand.

“*Dumbledore?*” he repeated, spitting the name like a curse. “The man you murdered?”

“The man you *believe* I murdered. If you’ll allow me to explain...”

“*No!*”

Severus swerved to one side, avoiding a poorly aimed Stunner.

“Dumbledore was already dying,” he continued, pausing momentarily to cast a shield. “His death, along with the manner in which it happened, was arranged between us.”

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Severus swallowed hard, begging for patience. “Potter,” he said quietly, “I have no wish to make this more difficult than it already is. But you *will* hear me out, one way or another. Do not force me to restrain you.”

*"He trusted you!"* Harry shouted. "Gave you a second chance, and you betrayed him!"

"And what," Severus said as he dodged another spell, "will convince you that I did not?"

*"Nothing!"* I know what you really are, what kind of nasty tricks..."

Keeping his wand pointed at Harry, Severus used his other hand to reach into the pocket of his cloak. Withdrawing the circlet of warped metal, he flung it at the boy's feet, unable to keep his lip from curling into a sneer.

"A trick, Potter? Does that look like a trick?"

Harry's eyes flickered back and forth, shifting from Severus to the diadem. His expression was full of curiosity — for a second, it seemed as if he might reach down and pick it up. But then he shook his head, taking a step backward.

"The bloody thing is probably cursed."

"Oh?" Severus raised an eyebrow, flicking his wand to block another spell. "In that case, perhaps you might be so generous as to answer two questions for me."

*"Stupefy!"*

"I'm afraid that's not the response I was looking for. Five points from Gryffindor."

Severus cringed, reminding himself that taunting the boy probably wasn't the best idea. Not if he hoped to get through to him, at any rate. Harry's eyes were blazing fire, his voice shaking as he unleashed a flurry of spells. Severus managed to block them all, though not without a surprising amount of effort.

"First question," he said, attempting to soften his tone. "If my intention was to harm you, how are you standing here, alive and relatively unscathed? Why wouldn't I have gotten rid of you years ago? You must admit I've had ample opportunity to do so."

Harry shook his head, his expression inscrutable. "Dumbledore would've never let you get away with..."

"If you believe that, then you've clearly underestimated me."

"Dumbledore was the greatest wizard Hogwarts has ever..."

"Perhaps, but he's also been gone for nearly a year. Since then, I've had plenty of opportunities to strike out against you if I'd chosen to do so."

Harry scowled. "If you're talking about the night you murdered him..."

*"Killed, Potter. Perhaps someday, you'll learn to appreciate the difference."*

"Whatever. Doesn't change the fact that you ran away like a coward."

Severus sucked in a sharp breath, determined to keep his temper under control. He hated that word, despised it more than anything in the world. But could he honestly say that the accusation was unfair, coming from a boy who'd been led to believe the worst of him at every possible turn?

“Coward,” he said softly. “Yes, I suppose that’s what you would’ve seen. Tell me — did you ever stop to wonder why I didn’t attempt to curse you that night? Why I merely deflected your spells?”

Harry hesitated, then shrugged. “You told the others that I belonged to Voldemort.”

“And did it ever occur to you that I might’ve said that simply to hold them off?”

“No.”

The boy responded without hesitation, and yet there was something peculiar about his behavior. One second, he glared at Severus with eyes full of hatred, firing off spells left and right. The next? He was listening intently, brow furrowed, as if struggling to make sense of it all.

Why? Was there some small part of him that wanted to believe Severus? To know that he wasn’t evil, to be convinced that Dumbledore had indeed chosen his death? Was he beginning to see through the lies he’d been fed all these years? Or was he simply overwhelmed, to the point where he wasn’t quite ready to refuse help from any possible quarter?

It could’ve been any of these things, though deep down, Severus knew it was more than that. For the first time, he glimpsed the boy’s innate goodness, a quality that was more familiar than he liked to admit. It was the longing to give others the benefit of the doubt, an unwillingness to see the worst in anyone if there might be another option.

Indeed, he recognized it. Of course he did. After all, it was a quality he’d only seen in one other person.

Lily.

And with that, the last of his resentment faded, replaced by a deep sense of shame.

“Harry,” he said quietly, not realizing he’d used the boy’s given name until it was too late.

Harry’s reaction was instantaneous — wide, disbelieving eyes, followed by a snarl of outrage. He backed up a couple steps, gripping his wand so tightly that Severus was surprised it didn’t snap in two.

“How *dare* you call me that?! You don’t... you have *no* right...”

Severus held up a hand to stop him, though the gesture was ignored. Again, it was impossible not to think of Lily — when she had a point to make, was there anything in the world that could dissuade her?

“*Harry?! I’ve never been anything but Potter to you! Lazy, arrogant, no different than my father. Isn’t that what you’ve always said? You never gave a damn...*”

“You’re right,” Severus interrupted, his voice heavy. “I didn’t. There were... reasons for that, though I can say nothing that excuses my behavior.”

“Reasons?”

And there it was again. In the blink of an eye, Harry’s expression shifted, his outrage replaced by something almost... hopeful?

No, that wasn't it. Not exactly. But he was more subdued now, at least, lowering his wand just a fraction as he watched Severus through wary eyes.

"Reasons we do not have time to discuss. There are more important matters to attend to just now, particularly where the Horcruxes are concerned. There's something I must tell you..."

"This... this is a trick. It has to be."

Unable to help himself, Severus smirked. "And to what end, I might ask? If it was my intention to harm you, I'd hardly need to convince you to trust my word beforehand."

"He's the one who wants me."

"Indeed, he does. That invites the same question, however. If I meant to incapacitate you, deliver you to the Dark Lord, I'd have no reason to..."

The sound was barely audible, just the slightest shuffle at the other end of the path. Severus whipped his head around, his eyes narrowing as they fell on a lopsided pile of books.

"Who's there?" he shouted. "Show yourself!"

Naturally, Harry took advantage of the distraction. He tossed another hex at Severus, one that would've rendered him defenseless had he not managed to swerve aside.

"Perhaps you can't tell the difference between ally and enemy," he hissed as he glanced back over his shoulder, "but I can. Save your silly hexes for those who truly *do* wish you harm."

As if on cue, three figures materialized from behind the stack of books. Two of them were hardly concerning — the other made him curse under his breath.

"Draco."

"Headmaster Snape," Draco said with a respectful nod. "We've come to see about Potter. Heard that he might be here."

"Indeed? In that case, I can assure you that I have the situation well in hand. You may return to..."

Before he could finish, Crabbe's wand zipped through the air, coming to rest on Granger. The girl was still bound and silenced, gazing up at him with wide, fearful eyes as he shouted, "*Cruc...*"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Severus felt a jolt of satisfaction as Crabbe flew backward, though that wasn't the end of his problems. He flung out his arm, managing to knock Goyle off balance as the boy cast a Stunner at Weasley.

"Bloody hell," Crabbe said, rubbing his overly large backside as he got to his feet. "What'd you have to go and do that for?"

Severus shrugged. "Let's just say I believe in a fair fight."

Spinning on his heel, he flicked his wand, freeing both Weasley and Granger from their restraints. They stared at him in shock, though unfortunately, he didn't have time to enjoy their reactions. The pair of dimwits were on them in a matter of seconds, streaks of light flying in every direction as Granger scrambled to her feet. She dove behind a table, a pile of rusty cauldrons clattering to the ground in her wake.

"Get back here, you little Mudblood!"

"Don't you bloody call her that!" Weasley roared, taking off in hot pursuit.

Harry stepped forward, obviously eager to join his friends. He was prevented from doing so by Draco, who let out a soft hissing sound, wand pointed directly at his chest.

"Draco," Severus said, his voice low. "You cannot harm him. The Dark Lord insists..."

"I know that," Draco said impatiently. "I'm only here because he has something I want. He came here to look for it... supposed to be some sort of crown. I don't know what it's for, but it's got to be important."

"Oh, is that all?" Harry knelt down, scrounging around beneath the bedding. He withdrew the diadem and then paused, seeming to deliberate for a minute before shoving it at Draco. "Take it. Go ahead, I won't stop you."

"What?"

"Take it!"

"Why would you..." Draco's eyes narrowed as he backed up a couple steps. "You knew we were listening, didn't you?"

"Just take the bloody thing,"

"Look, I don't know what you're up to, but..."

Severus had only been half listening, distracted by the crashes and screams coming from the other side of the room. Abruptly, he jerked his head around, giving Draco a sharp look.

"Don't take it to him."

Just like that, Draco abandoned his suspicions toward Harry, focusing on him instead.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a fake," Severus said, "a mere replica of the item the Dark Lord wishes to possess. If you present him with such an unworthy object, he will not be pleased."

Snatching the diadem out of Harry's hand, Draco backed up a couple steps. "You're lying. You just want to take it to him yourself!"

"I assure you, I do not."

"Trying to take all the credit, just like you did last year! He asked *me* to do it, and you had to keep butting in, didn't you? Never even gave me a chance!"

"You couldn't have done it, Draco."

"I could have! If you'd just stayed out of the bloody way..."

Harry must've known they were talking about Dumbledore. His entire demeanor changed in an instant, becoming as close lipped and hostile as he'd been when Severus had first approached. Without warning, he flung out his wand, pointing it at one and then the other before making what was clearly the wiser choice.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he shouted, and it was only a quick *Protego* Charm from Severus that kept Draco from being disarmed. "I *knew* it! I knew you were lying! You, the *both* of you..."

"*Stupefy!*"

This time, Severus moved in Harry's defense, throwing up a shield that managed to deflect the Stunner. Both boys froze, staring at him in bewilderment.

It was Draco who recovered first, lips twisting into a scowl. "Whose bloody side are you on?"

"The answer to that," Severus said, snatching the diadem out of his hand and tossing it aside, "should be obvious."

"But why would you..."

"Because we've wasted enough time already. Take Crabbe and Goyle and join the others — I expect they've penetrated the castle by now. As for me, I have business to attend to."

"Business?" Draco shot back. "What, like bringing Potter to him yourself?"

"What I intend to do is follow orders. That is all you need to know. Now go — tell the Dark Lord I'll be along shortly."

"But..."

"*Harry!*"

This scream wasn't like the others. It was high-pitched and full of terror, underscored by a distant roar that grew louder by the second. Severus frowned, wondering how a dragon could've gotten into the Room of Requirement. It took him a moment to recognize the sound for what it was, his blood turning cold even as the first wave of heat washed over his skin.

"*Go!*" he yelled at no one in particular. "Go, go!"

Turning to face the fire, he cursed under his breath. On a smaller scale, he was quite adept at handling Fiendfyre, but they were far beyond the point where he might've hoped to bring the flames under control. Escape was their only option... indeed, if it was still an option at all.

"*Partis Temporus!*" he shouted, creating a small path between the towering walls of flame. If he could just give them clearance to the door...

"Hermione! Ron! Over here!"

The boy was clever... far more clever than Severus had ever given him credit for. He'd spotted a pair of broomsticks, tossing one to the girl before swinging his leg over the other.

"Hurry, Ron!"

Weasley flung himself on the back of Granger's broom, wrapping his arms around her waist as the three of them ascended high into the air.

There was no broomstick for Severus, though of course, he didn't need one. Drawing on the skill that the Dark Lord had taught him, he launched himself toward the ceiling.

Even at this height, the heat was unbearable, the smell of charred skin and burning fabric informing him that he'd already been hit by a few stray embers. That was nothing next to the ache in his throat, however, his voice hoarse with panic as he called for Draco.

Fearing it was already too late, he backtracked, returning to the spot where he'd last seen the boy. The area had long since been swallowed, a pair of fiery serpents gobbling up one last heap of junk before rejoining the rest of the flames.

"Draco!" he yelled, though it might as well have been a whisper. "If you can hear me..."

From the other side of the room, there was a terrible scream... the kind of scream that could only mean one thing.

"*Fuck!*"

Reflexively, Severus's eyes snapped back to Harry. To his relief, the boy was still safely above the flames with Granger and Weasley hovering just beside him.

"Out, Potter!" he shouted. "Get to the bloody door!"

Abandoning his search for Draco, he shot through the air, doing his best to reach the others. He'd nearly made it when Harry's broom swooped down, disappearing into a cloud of smoke and fire.

"*Potter!*"

There was no use shouting, no hope that his commands would even be heard, let alone obeyed. Before he knew it, Granger was following Harry's lead, executing a slightly less graceful dive.

What the hell were they doing? More importantly, what the hell was *he* supposed to do if the illustrious trio ended up dead? The war would be lost, not to mention...

But before Severus could finish that thought, the pair of brooms was up again, hovering in front of him for a split second before finally, *finally* barreling toward the door.

Only then did Severus realize what had happened, spotting a familiar figure on the back of Harry's broom. Draco? The boy had risked his life to save... *Draco?*

Shaking his head, he shot through the doorway behind them, realizing too late that he'd underestimated his momentum. He smashed into the opposite wall, hitting the floor with a painful thud. That was quickly forgotten as he remembered how to breathe, however, filling his lungs with cool, fresh air as he turned his head to look at the children. They were coughing and sputtering, but seemed relatively unharmed... well, with the exception of Goyle, who appeared to be unconscious.

"C-Crabbe," Draco sobbed, a single tear trickling down to form a pathway on his soot stained cheek. "C-Crabbe..."

"He's dead," Weasley responded.



It was no big loss. Rationally, Severus knew that. Out of all his Slytherins, Crabbe had been one of the most vicious, certainly the most dimwitted of the lot.

Nonetheless, the weight of responsibility lay heavy on his shoulders, a sensation he'd become intimately familiar with over the past twenty years. Oh yes... there was no mistaking that nagging voice in the back of his head, suggesting that he might've saved a life if he'd simply chosen a different course of action.

Cursing under his breath, he shook it off. He might've made many mistakes over the course of his life, but casting Fiendfyre at such an inopportune moment wasn't one of them. Dead or alive, no one could take the blame for that but Crabbe himself.

Satisfied with this conclusion, Severus lifted his head, meeting Harry's eyes as the boy pushed himself to his feet. For an endless moment, they simply stared at one another. Harry's body was tense, wand clutched tightly... though Severus couldn't help but notice that he kept it at his side.

"Potter..."

The rest of his words were swallowed by a crash, followed by a flurry of shouts from just around the corner. And just like that, he realized he'd failed — this was neither the time or the place to pass along his message. The boy wasn't ready to hear it, and Severus... well, he didn't have the luxury of waiting around.

"Go," he said quietly.

Harry froze, as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd just heard.

"Go, Potter. Take your friends and go."

It was Granger who finally spurred him into action, coming up behind him and tugging at his arm. "We have to go, Harry! Come on!"

"The Horcrux..."

She waved a dismissive hand before reaching down to help Weasley to his feet. "On the off chance it was still in there, which hardly seems likely, it's gone now. Fiendfyre destroys Horcruxes — don't you know that?"

Despite himself, Severus felt his lips twitching. That know-it-all attitude, that imperious tone... yes, *that* was the Hermione Granger he remembered. Brilliant, persistent, exceptionally observant... annoying, yes, but her superior knowledge could hardly be denied.

Even now, she missed nothing, her eyes widening as she registered his amusement. He willed the corners of his mouth to turn upward, flashing her the first genuine smile she'd ever seen from him.

She stared at him, stunned.

"Go," he mouthed at her.

Unlike Harry, she didn't need further encouragement. She turned on her heel and fled, practically dragging her friends along behind her.

"You let him go?" Draco's voice was raspy, his expression bewildered.

“No time to discuss it just now. Come, Draco.”

Surprisingly, young Malfoy followed without protest, not saying a word as Severus levitated Goyle’s body through the closest door. It led to a dusty storeroom, where Severus was relieved to find one of those tiny silver buttons.

“In here. Now.”

Soon enough, they were cloaked in darkness, safely concealed behind the wall.

“What’s going on? I don’t understand.”

Severus flicked his wand, lowering Goyle’s body to the ground. “No,” he said, wiping his forehead as he leaned against the wall. “I suppose you don’t.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“To keep you safe, if that is what you choose.”

“Safe?”

“Tell me, Draco — what do you want?”

“Sir?”

“It’s a simple question.”

Draco had never looked more like a child than he did in that moment, eyes darting up and down the dimly lit passage before coming to rest on Severus. Those eyes pleaded with him, though of course, Draco couldn’t have been aware of the message he was sending. No matter — Severus recognized the uncertainty, the fear, confident that what he was about to do was the right decision.

“Well?”

“I... I want to serve the Dark Lord.”

“No, you don’t.”

Draco’s eyes went wide. “I do! Please, if you’ll just let me go to him...”

“And do what? Serve as his personal killing machine? Murder other students, professors, people you’ve known for years? You might not like them all, but somehow, I do not think you wish to see them dead.”

“But the Dark Lord...”

Severus shrugged. “Of course, there’s always the alternative. You could walk out of here and be struck down in a matter of minutes. That, I think, is far more likely.”

“I’m a good fighter!”

That wasn’t exactly true, though it would hardly help to injure the boy’s vanity.

“Without a doubt,” Severus agreed. “But even the most proficient fighter can only handle so many opponents at once. What will you do if you’re cornered, set upon by three, four, perhaps even a dozen?”

Draco snorted. “What was it you said about fair fights?”

“This is war, Draco, not a dueling class. Rules of proper conduct do not apply. Whoever you face, they’ll do everything they can to kill you. No mercy, no hesitation...”

Severus trailed off, gritting his teeth as he clutched his forearm. He hadn’t even realized that the Dark Lord had been summoning him, his skin still burning in multiple places from the Fiendfyre. Indeed, he might not have noticed at all if this weren’t a different kind of summons, infinitely stronger and more urgent. Clearly, the Dark Lord was becoming impatient, meaning he was swiftly running out of time.

“At any rate,” he continued, “it doesn’t matter. Even if you *do* make it through the battle unscathed, what kind of future will you have to look forward to? If you fight for him and he loses, you’ll wind up in Azkaban. If he wins... well, do you truly wish to live out the rest of your life in his service?”

“No.” Draco reached up to cover his mouth, his expression horrified. “I mean, no, I won’t betray him, if that’s what you’re asking. You’re trying to trick me!”

Severus smirked. “Tell me something, Draco — if I was truly loyal to the Dark Lord, would I have let Potter go just now? Why has he remained free for all these years, when I’ve had countless opportunities to capture him? Haven’t you ever wondered...”

“Of course I have,” Draco interrupted. “I just didn’t want to think... wait, what are you saying? Are you telling me that you’re a *traitor*?”

“That’s a matter of perspective,” Severus said with a shrug. “At any rate, you still haven’t answered my question. What do you want, Draco?”

“I don’t... I mean, I’m not sure...”

“Or perhaps you can tell me what you *don’t* want. Do you want to die?”

Draco shook his head.

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life in the Dark Lord’s service?”

Another shake, barely perceptible this time.

“Very well, then allow me to tell you this. He will not win tonight. In fact, I intend to make sure he doesn’t.”

“How? I mean, why would you...”

“I cannot explain just now.” Severus paused, wincing through another wave of pain. “If you wish to live, to walk free when all this is over, you *must* stay where you are. Tend to your friend, but do not leave these passages.”

“Yeah, but what if someone...”

“No one can find you here.”

“No one?” Draco echoed, no longer bothering to hide the hope in his expression.

“Well, no one that would wish to do you harm. These passages belong to the acting headmaster — only those who have my express permission may enter. They are untrackable,

unplottable..."

Severus trailed off, panting harshly as he suffered through another direct summons. To make matters worse, it seemed that Draco had received one, too.

"I don't want this," he whimpered, his voice catching on a sob. "If I'd known, I would've never..."

"I know," Severus said. "Trust me, I know. But if you can hold out for just a little longer, I'll make it stop."

"I can't stand it! I'd almost rather go than... ow!"

"Here." Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew his sack of potions. Enlarging it to its normal size, he pulled out a couple of vials, pressing them into Draco's hand. "When Goyle wakes up, give him a few drops of the yellow one."

"And the other?"

"That one is for you. It won't get rid of the pain, but it'll take the edge off. Four, maybe five drops should do it."

"Okay."

As soon as I reach the Dark Lord, I'll inform him that both of you are... incapacitated. That should prevent another direct summons."

Draco nodded, uncorking the vial and lifting it to his lips. A few seconds later, his body relaxed, followed by a nod of satisfaction.

"Works pretty well."

"Potions typically do when they're correctly made."

"Aren't you going to take some?"

"I won't need it."

"My parents..."

Severus let out a sigh. "I can't make any promises, but if I see a way to help them, I will. I have to..." He paused, gripping his arm with white knuckled fingers. "I need to go now. Look after Goyle, and don't..."

"Don't leave the passage. Got it."

With a brief nod, Severus turned away, pulling his cloak more tightly around his shoulders. He set off down the passageway, though he'd gone no more than a few steps before Draco called out to him.

"Sir?"

"Yes?" he said as he glanced back over his shoulder.

"Thank you."

## 82. The Ultimate Betrayal

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### Chapter 82: The Ultimate Betrayal

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“*Stupefy!*”

Lily slashed her wand through the air, huffing in satisfaction as the Death Eater flew backward. He slammed into a pillar and then slumped forward, landing facedown on the floor.

“Nice one!”

“Thanks, George.”

“Fred. Still got both my ears, see?” He grinned at her, wiggling them slightly.

“Oh, that’s right.” She paused, casting a quick hex at an approaching shadow. “Sorry about that.”

Fred shrugged. “People have been mixing us up all our lives. We... *Colloshoo!* We tend to prefer it that way.”

Lily decided not to ask him why. Beyond throwing spells and dodging countless jets of light, she was too busy keeping an eye on Harry, shielding him whenever she could get away with it.

Not that he needed her help. He was handling himself quite well, eyes bright with excitement as he shouted, “*Expelliarmus!*” His opponent shot backward, wand soaring out the open window.

“So you’re Burbage’s sister, eh?”

“What? Oh, ah, yes.”

Fred nodded, tossing out another jinx. “Good woman, Burbage. Only gave us detention twice. Between you and me, I think she liked...”

“Hello, Minister!” Percy Weasley shouted, distracting them both. “Did I mention I’m resigning?”

“*Look out!*”

Lily didn’t know where the warning had come from, but there was no mistaking the streak of light that followed. She barely had time to swerve, the Stunner grazing her shoulder rather than slamming into her chest. The momentum was still enough to knock her off balance — she panicked as she lost her footing, realizing she was about to make a hard landing.

“*Pulvinus!*”

The charm wasn't as strong as it could've been, but it saved her from the brunt of the impact, which could've been disastrous. She pressed a hand to her stomach, relieved to feel the baby stir against her open palm.

"You're joking, Perce!" Fred yelled at his brother as he moved to help her up. "You actually *are* joking. I don't think I've heard you joke since you were..."

Without warning, the opposite wall exploded. The sound was deafening, huge chunks of stone hurtling through the air as Lily hastily erected a shield charm. Really, it was fortunate that she'd already been lying down — she cringed as she heard several bodies smack into the floor, followed by grunts of pain.

"Harry?" she called as the dust began to settle. "*Harry!*"

Only then did she realize that there was someone lying half on top of her, one hand splayed across her breast. Beneath the dust, Fred's hair was as bright as a copper coin, his smile equally brilliant as his eyes met hers.

"Cushioning Charm? Nice."

"Yes, I cast it when..." But then she picked up on the double meaning, rolling her eyes as she swatted his hand away. "This is hardly the time for jokes."

Yet even as she said it, she realized that everyone was fine. They were a bit shaken up, of course, and she certainly didn't like the cut on Harry's cheek. But other than that, they'd been extremely lucky — only the castle itself had sustained any real damage.

"Harry," Hermione said. "We need to..."

"*Get down!*"

The curses were coming from outside now, flung at them through the gaping hole in the side of the castle. Fred, who'd just held out a hand in another attempt to help her to her feet, dropped to his knees instead.

"Seems that the Death Eaters don't want you to get up," he said with a shrug. "Might as well get comfortable, yeah? Lie back, have a little nap..."

Lily gasped. "I... I don't think that's going to happen."

"Right. It is a bit noisy around here."

"No," she said, gesturing frantically at the pile of rubble behind her. Fred glanced over his shoulder, his eyes widening as he spotted the gigantic spider.

"Bloody hell!"

Jumping to his feet, he helped her up, dragging her behind a pillar that was still somewhat intact. The spider disappeared, but they didn't even have time to breathe a sigh of relief as Harry peered through the hole.

"It brought friends," he called, firing off a flurry of Stunning Spells.

Despite her best efforts, Lily lost sight of him soon thereafter. The hall was filling with people now, friends and enemies alike. It was all she could do to keep herself covered, barely

missing a jet of green light as she responded with a cry of, "*Alarte Ascendare!*"

"Harry?" she called, glancing up and down the demolished hallway. But it was too late — he was already gone.

Only then did she notice the slight itching sensation at the tip of her nose. She ducked into a nearby classroom, sighing in frustration before trying the one next door. This one had the opening she needed — one push of a tiny silver button and she was safe, enveloped in quiet darkness.

She had no intention of abandoning the battle, but she needed to get her bearings. Not only would she need to refresh her disguise soon, but she was already beginning to tire. Pregnancy might have little effect on her magic, but the same couldn't be said for her stamina.

With that in mind, she leaned against the wall, forcing her body to relax. It wasn't fair, really. The others were still out there fighting for their lives, unaware of the sanctuary that lay just a few steps away. But of course, there'd be no point in telling them about it either — without direct permission from the headmaster, it wasn't as if they could enter.

After a few minutes, she fished in her pocket, pulling out another vial of Polyjuice. It was still a little too soon to take it, but if she was planning on going back out to fight, there was no telling when she'd have another opportunity. Surely it would be better to...

"Who are you?"

Startled, she dropped the vial, hardly noticing as it hit the floor and shattered. She spun on her heel, finding herself face to face with Draco Malfoy, of all people. His eyes were narrowed, wand pointed directly at her chest.

"Draco?"

"Who are you?" he repeated, his expression inscrutable. "How do you know my name?"

In that moment, Lily realized how deeply she trusted Severus. She gazed at Draco without a trace of fear, knowing he would've never been given access if Severus had thought, even for a second, that he might do her harm.

"I'm a friend of the headmaster's," she said, keeping her voice gentle. "We've never met, but I... used to know your parents. You look just like them."

"My parents?" Draco frowned. "Whose side are you on?"

She was treading on dangerous ground, perhaps, but Lily decided to tell him the truth. "I fight for the Light."

"Look, I'm not... I mean, I was, but..."

"Changed your mind?"

"Sort of."

"Well," she said, flashing him a smile. "Can't say I blame you for that."

"You... you don't think I'm a coward?"

“Not at all. It takes a lot of bravery to admit you made a mistake. That’s even more true when that admission means going against your family and friends, not to mention placing yourself in danger.”

“Is that what happened with Headmaster Snape?”

“Something like that.”

“He lied to me,” Draco said abruptly. “The Dark Lord, I mean. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

She nodded. “He lied to Severus, too.”

“Is that why he’s trying to stop him?”

So he *did* know. Lily hesitated, surprised that Severus had chosen to be so open, though she had to admit that it was a relief, too. It meant that she didn’t have to watch her words so closely, worried she might be endangering him if she revealed too much.

Still, not all of Severus’s secrets were hers to share. Those would have to come from his own mouth should he ever choose to disclose them.

“His reasons are a bit more complicated than that.”

“They’ll call him a traitor, you know. The Death Eaters, Aunt Bellatrix, probably even my parents.”

“Of course they will.” Lily scowled. “Not that it matters. You can’t betray those who intentionally misled you.”

“Do you really believe that?”

She hesitated, giving Draco a long, measuring look. “Anyone who deserves his loyalty — or yours — would never ask either of you to betray your own conscience. They wouldn’t force you to choose between them and the people you love.”

“That’s what happened, isn’t it? There was someone that Headmaster Snape cared about, and the Dark Lord...”

“Yes,” she interrupted, surprised by his perceptiveness. “How did you know?”

“That’s what it took for me,” he said with a shrug. “Can’t say I was happy, but I probably would’ve gone along with it if it wasn’t for my parents. The way he’s been treating them... it’s been really bad.”

She nodded. “That’s what Severus told me. I’m sorry, Draco.”

“I haven’t been fair to him,” Draco said, his voice quiet. “Headmaster Snape, I mean. After that business last year... well, I’ve been pretty nasty. Thought he wanted to take all the credit for himself, that he didn’t care how much my family suffered for it.”

“He does care,” she said gently. “Probably more than you realize.”

“I know that now. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have saved me. He wouldn’t have brought me and Goyle in here and given us a place to hide. He’s tried to protect me plenty of other times, too, even if I was too stupid to realize it. I just...”



“You and *who*?”

“Goyle.”

“I see. And where is he?”

“Sleeping. Just gave him a potion.”

*Potion?* Lily glanced down at the shattered vial, reminding herself that she didn’t have the luxury of talking all night. A crash from above seemed to emphasize that point, filling her with anxiety as she wondered where her loved ones might be.

“I’m sorry, Draco, but I’ve got to go.”

“Do you? Kinda nice having someone to talk to.”

“Maybe your friend will wake up soon.”

Draco shrugged. “Even if he does, he’s not exactly the chatty sort, if you know what I mean. When all this is over, I should really find some new friends.”

“Well,” Lily said with a smile, “one can never have too many friends.”

“I guess.”

“It was nice to meet you, Draco. Be safe.”

“You too.”

She took off in the opposite direction, ducking into a side passage and following it until it made a sharp left turn. A few more steps and she turned right, concealing herself in a tiny alcove. Only then did she reach in her pocket, though it wasn’t a vial of Polyjuice she withdrew.

The coin. How could she have forgotten? Had it slipped Severus’s mind, too? Yes, that had to be why she hadn’t heard from him. She refused to consider the alternative.

Clutching it tightly, she closed her eyes, concentrating on the message she wanted to send.

*Severus... are you safe?*

After what seemed like a lifetime, the coin grew warm.

*Relatively speaking? Yes.*

The message faded, though it was quickly replaced by another.

*Where are you?*

*Passages.*

*Good. Make it back to quarters if you can.*

Lily hesitated, cringing at the suggestion. The idea of isolating herself in those painfully familiar rooms, helpless and silent while the men she loved fought for their lives? She could hardly imagine anything worse.

*Severus?*

*I'm here.*

*Stay safe, all right? I love you.*

*And I love you. Always.*

She tucked the coin back in her pocket, relieved that she hadn't been forced to lie. Pulling out a vial of Polyjuice, she realized she needed to reapply her glamours as well. She could tell they were starting to fade — her breasts were larger, the curve of her belly slightly more pronounced.

Conjuring a small mirror, she could see that her face had changed as well. Her formerly blonde hair had turned auburn, caught somewhere between her own fiery red and Charity's mousy brown.

*Lily!*

To her credit, she didn't drop the bottle this time, though she did let out a little scream. She whipped around, expecting to find the cat behind her.

"Charity? Where the bloody hell are you?"

*On your sleeve.*

It took Lily a minute to spot the tiny brown moth, half concealed by a fold of fabric.

*Not my first choice*, Charity thought at her, *but it's definitely easier to get around this way.*

"I remember," she said, recalling the night she'd watched Severus kill Dumbledore.

*What are you doing down here? Thought for sure you'd be up there fighting.*

"I was. Just taking a short break."

*Probably a good idea. Anyway, Severus asked me to...*

"Have you seen him?" Lily interrupted. "How about Harry?"

*Haven't seen Severus since he went into the Room of Hidden Things.*

"Why would he..."

*I believe he wanted to talk to Harry.*

*Of course.* Lily cursed under her breath, realizing how close she'd come to thwarting his plans. She'd tried so hard to convince Harry that the Horcrux had already been destroyed — It hadn't even occurred to her that the Room of Hidden Things would've been the most logical place for Severus to pass along Dumbledore's message.

Fortunately, Harry had been too stubborn to take her at her word, for which she was exceedingly grateful.

"So what happened? Does Harry know the truth? Did he and Severus..."

*I have no idea.*

"Well, where's Harry? Have you seen him?"

*About 15 minutes ago. He was having a discussion with Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger — I decided to have a listen.*

“And?”

*They were talking about going after the snake, then Harry must’ve gotten a glimpse into You-Know-Who’s mind. I don’t know how that works, exactly, but he said that both of them were in the Shrieking Shack.*

“You-Know-Who and Nagini?”

Charity bobbed her head. *According to Harry, Lucius Malfoy had just been sent to fetch Severus.*

“And Harry?”

*On his way there now.*

“So you’re telling me that *both* of them...”

But Lily couldn’t finish. Before she knew it, she was running, darting down one passage and then another, searching for the quickest way out of the castle.

*Lily, wait!*

“Can’t,” she gasped, almost stumbling as she took a sharp left turn. “If both of them are there — with *him* — there’s no telling what... I can’t just... I have to...”

She nearly smacked into the wall, her fingers fumbling for the tiny silver button.

WAIT!

“You don’t understand. I’ve got to...”

*I’m not trying to stop you, Lily. But there are dozens of Death Eaters on the other side of that wall, not to mention every other kind of foul creature you can imagine. If you go running out there like a scared rabbit, you’ll be dead before you make it to the Front Entrance.*

As panicked as she was, Lily couldn’t help but see the sense in that.

“Disillusionment?”

*Good place to start.*

She knew her disguise would be wearing off soon, though she didn’t want to take the time to refresh it. At any rate, it didn’t matter — the Disillusionment Charm rendered her more or less invisible.

Taking a deep breath, she pressed the button, wand clutched tightly as she stepped out from behind the wall.

For the first time in months, her stomach churned with nausea. The situation had rapidly deteriorated during her brief time in the passages, bodies littering the ground all around her. She watched in horror as a werewolf plunged his jaws into one that was still weakly struggling, his muzzle coated with blood as he lifted his head to unleash a howl of triumph.

Swallowing hard, she made her way around the perimeter of the room, managing to slip out of the Front Entrance without being seen.

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Severus was on his guard from the moment Lucius appeared at his side, informing him that the Dark Lord wanted to see him in the Shrieking Shack. Of course, there was nothing to be done about it — he obeyed without hesitation, swallowing his unease as he waited for Lucius to be dismissed.

“My lord,” he said, taking pains to sound deferential. “You wished to see me?”

Voldemort didn’t bother to look at him. He kept his eyes on the snake, which was suspended in a protective cage.

“Yes, Severus. We have important matters to discuss.”

“I’m at your service, as always.”

“While I’m pleased with the way events are unfolding...” Voldemort trailed off, running a pale finger along the length of his wand.

“It is indeed a triumph, my lord. Their resistance is crumbling...”

“And it is doing so without your help. Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make much difference now. We are almost there... almost.”

Severus tensed. If the Dark Lord saw him as disposable...

“Let me find the boy,” he said hastily. “Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my lord. Please.”

It was strange. Cruelly ironic, really. For once, Voldemort didn’t seem the least bit interested in Harry’s whereabouts.

“I have a problem, Severus,” he said softly.

Severus struggled to make sense of Voldemort’s peculiar behavior as he began to talk about his wand, of all things. He demanded to know why it didn’t work for him, which seemed like a ridiculous claim. How many people had he struck down in recent months? How many had he maimed, tortured, bent to his will...

“I don’t understand. You... you have performed extraordinary magic with that wand.”

“No, I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand? No. It has not revealed the wonders it has promised.”

*Wonders?* Now Severus was thoroughly confused, holding his breath as he watched the Dark Lord prowl the confines of the room. There was danger lurking here, an imminent threat he could feel like an icy wind blowing over his skin. The problem was, he didn’t know how to guard himself against it. How could he, when he couldn’t identify the source?

“I have thought long and hard, Severus. Do you know why I’ve called you back from the battle?”

“No, my lord,” he said, struggling to keep his voice steady, “but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter...”

The more he pleaded, the more Voldemort rejected the idea. He just continued to obsess over his wand, insisting that it had to be defective in some way.

“Why did both the wands I have used fail?”

*Both?*

Naturally, Severus knew about the twin cores, which had saved Harry’s life in the graveyard. But Voldemort had switched to Lucius’s wand — shouldn’t that have resolved the issue?

He thought back to the previous summer, one particular night when dozens of streaks of light had illuminated the jet black sky. He’d been too focused on playing his own part in the battle, determined to keep Harry alive. But Voldemort had been using Lucius’s wand that night, hadn’t he? Had he managed to get a direct hit?

Oh yes, he remembered now. He’d paid the price for the Dark Lord’s failure, after all, his battered body dumped on a hillside just a few hours later. That had to be why the memory had slipped his mind — between the excruciating pain and bouts of unconsciousness, he simply hadn’t been capable of analyzing the reasons for his suffering. Indeed, his only coherent thought had been of Lily, along with the mindnumbing fear of what would happen to her if he didn’t survive.

Yes, it was fair to say that he’d had other things on his mind. That day in the Forbidden Forest, right on the heels of his recovery? It was hard to imagine himself analyzing the finer points of the battle once Lily had risen from that cauldron, alive and beautifully human.

Even now, that memory was captivating, one he knew he’d cherish until his final breath. He couldn’t afford the distraction, however, so he buried it behind his shields, focusing on the subject at hand.

Lucius’s wand... why hadn’t it worked? Surely it must’ve had something to do with the Horcrux, though Severus couldn’t see what the conflict was.

He took a closer look at the slender length of wood in Voldemort’s hand, only to realize it wasn’t Lucius’s wand at all. And then gradually, the pieces settled into place, dawning suspicion followed by a cold sense of dread.

“I sought a third wand, Severus. The Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. I took it from the grave of Albus Dumbledore.”

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The scene outside was horrific. Curses flew in every direction, leaving countless bodies strewn across the lawn. Lily swallowed hard, picking her way around the corpses as she inched toward the Whomping Willow.

*Do you see that?*

“What?” she whispered.

*The Whomping Willow. It's stopped moving.*

After a second, the tree lurched into motion again, branches flailing wildly. Lily knew what had happened, which was obviously the same conclusion that Charity had come to. Harry *did* have the Invisibility Cloak, after all — he must've found a way to press the knot.

Clever, but what was *she* supposed to do? She was still some distance away, her path littered by Death Eaters, giants, massive spiders... bloody hell, were those *vampires*?

"Wait," she said softly.

Refreshing her Disillusionment Charm, she cast a handful of other spells, reminding herself that it wasn't only the sense of sight that mattered. There were five senses, after all, any of which could've easily alerted the enemy to her presence.

Of course, these precautionary measures also meant that Charity could no longer hear her, though there was little she could do about that. She began to creep forward again, hoping like hell she wouldn't come too late.

But then finally, she was there, watching as a small swallow dove between the branches. It tapped its beak against the knot, giving her the opening she needed.

"Thank you," she breathed, forgetting that Charity couldn't hear her as she poked her head inside the tunnel.

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Severus stared at Voldemort, stunned.

The wand had been plucked from the pages of legend, an object that was believed to have been lost for centuries if it had ever existed at all. But was that really the shocking part? No... if anyone could've found it, it would've been Dumbledore.

What left Severus speechless was that Dumbledore had never told him. How could he have concealed such crucial information? He must've known it would come to this.

"My lord, let me go to the boy..."

But what was the point in begging now? Severus knew he'd failed, and worse, that he'd been set up to do so. If he'd known... bloody hell, if he'd only *known* what to expect, he would've been prepared for it.

"All this long night, when I'm on the brink of victory, I have sat here... wondering, wondering why the Elder Wand refuses to be what it ought to be..."

Severus swallowed hard, unable to stop his legs from shaking.

"I think I have the answer."

If he'd only fucking *known*...

"Perhaps you already know it?" Voldemort prompted, his voice soft. "You *are* a clever man, after all, Severus. You have been a good and faithful servant, and I regret what must happen."

“My lord...”

But what could he say? There was nothing left but fear, underscored by the bitterness of betrayal. How could Dumbledore have done this to him? Why had he never told him that casting the Killing Curse would be tantamount to suicide?

True, Severus had never expected to survive this war. Dumbledore had known that all along. But if that were the case, then why the secrecy? Had Dumbledore feared that he'd be too much of a coward to follow through if he'd known the manner of his death beforehand?

If so, he'd been wrong. Severus had never been afraid to die, whether it was the fate he would've wished for or not. What he couldn't bear, especially at this late date, was the realization that his death would most likely be in vain.

Voldemort was still speaking, though Severus hardly heard him. His ears were ringing, his throat tight with panic as he scrambled for some last-ditch solution. If the boy didn't get the message... the message he had yet to deliver because *he hadn't fucking realized how little time he'd had left...*

Lily. It would have to be Lily. If he could just...

“My lord!” He lifted his wand, desperate to buy himself a little more time. Minutes... seconds... his other hand was in his pocket, searching frantically for the coin. He couldn't find it... fuck, he needed...

“It cannot be any other way,” Voldemort said, his voice suddenly loud and clear. “I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last.”

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“Shit.”

The tunnel was small, so much smaller than Lily remembered. But then again, she'd been inhabiting Crookshanks the last time she'd been here. She'd never attempted to pass through as a fully grown human, let alone one who was very much pregnant.

Panting with exertion, she wriggled her way inside, pausing to discard her cloak. She felt naked without it, especially now that her disguise had worn off. Her belly was an unmistakable protrusion, round and heavy, hindering her movements as she began to crawl.

The process was slow, frustrating, far more tiring than she would've liked to admit. But she forced herself to keep moving, until finally, the tunnel sloped upward, followed by a low murmur of voices in the room above.

Was that... Severus?

But even as she moved closer, straining to hear what he was saying, his words were lost in a bloodcurdling scream. She cried out at the exact same moment, the breath knocked from her lungs as his body hit the floor.

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Severus never had a chance to brace himself. All he could do was scream, unleashing a harsh, hideous sound as Nagini plunged her fangs into his neck. It was an agony like nothing he'd ever felt before, a pain so brutal that he couldn't seem to breathe. Or maybe that was the cage? It seemed to be growing tighter, stealing the air from his lungs... a pair of objects slipped through his fingers, clattering to the floor as he fought to escape the confines of the suffocating prison.

Suddenly, it was gone, depriving him of his only means of support. He swayed on his knees for a split second before he collapsed, his vision blurring as another wave of pain shuddered through him.

Only when he blinked the tears away did he notice the blood, spreading around him in an ever widening pool. It was too much... far too much... he was shaking violently now, so weak he could barely lift his arm. After several failed attempts, he finally found the strength, pressing his hand against the gaping wound.

"No," he whispered, his voice emerging as a feeble croak. "No... please..."

Death was inevitable. He knew that now, even as he fought to stay alive. Pushing his hand more firmly against the puncture marks, he forced his eyes to remain open as his breath came in shallow, tortured pants. He didn't even allow himself to blink as he gazed out across the floor, desperate to prolong his final look at the world.

It was a dismal sight — broken furniture and bits of trash, the pair of objects he'd dropped lying just beyond his reach. And yet it was infinitely preferable to the empty void that hovered at the edges of his consciousness, making him realize that life, even at its dirtiest, its ugliest, its very worst, was a precious thing.

"Ac-Accio... wand... potion..."

He didn't know why he bothered to summon the objects. They were useless to him now, missing his outstretched hand and landing in the folds of his cloak instead. Nonetheless, he groped for the vial, grunting in frustration as it slipped from his fingers and rolled away.

Death. He'd imagined it countless times, though never quite like this. Pain was to be expected, along with the pervasive chill that was beginning to creep into his bones. But the loneliness... oh no, he'd never anticipated that.

Perhaps after all, he was a coward, but he would've given anything to have someone there beside him. More than a warm blanket or even relief from the pain, he found himself craving comforts that only another human could offer. Understanding, compassion, a soothing touch...

Forgiveness?

Severus didn't know where the thought had come from, but it seemed to have conjured a hallucination. It was Harry's face he saw, a haunting reminder of broken promises and countless failures. He wanted to speak to that vision, offer up some useless apology that might soothe his conscience. But when he opened his mouth, he could do nothing but close it again, giving his head a feeble shake.

Only then did he realize that the boy wasn't a hallucination at all. He was too solid, too real, an unmistakable presence as he dropped to the floor beside him. His expression was full



of... concern?

That seemed wrong somehow, though Severus didn't have the strength to question it. He simply lay there, trembling more violently than ever, wondering what the boy was hoping to accomplish as his hand was drawn away from his neck. It was replaced by a wad of fabric, pressed tight against the open wound.

*Don't bother*, Severus wanted to tell him. *It's too late*. And yet the simple fact that Harry Potter, of all people, was attempting to save his *life*? He couldn't imagine what he'd done to deserve...

*Fuck!*

He couldn't speak the word, but it rang out in his head as clear as a bell. The message... he'd nearly forgotten Dumbledore's message. Too late? Perhaps not, but how was he supposed to pass it along? He was beyond the ability to communicate by any conventional means... though of course, there was always magic.

Could he find the strength? Not for his own sake, certainly, but for the others... for Lily and their unborn child...

Desperate now, Severus struggled to focus, gathering up his memories and thrusting them outward through sheer force of will. Silvery mist swirled around his head, seeping from his mouth, his eyes and ears.

"Take it..." he rasped, each word a torment as it emerged from his throat. "Take it..."

Harry didn't seem to notice. He was still attempting to staunch the blood flow, mumbling an apology as he applied more pressure. *Useless*, Severus wanted to tell him. *Just take the bloody memories!* His eyes fluttered closed, his eyelids heavier than bricks as he managed to force them open again. Only then did he notice the pair of figures hovering in the background.

"Take it," he whispered one last time, giving Hermione a pleading look.

She stepped forward, conjuring a flask as she knelt at his side. Carefully, she scooped up his memories, sealing the vial before she retreated back into the shadows.

The room was growing darker now, agonizing pain giving way to a numb sort of drowsiness. Severus couldn't seem to catch his breath, forcing the last bit of air from his lungs in three whispered words.

"Look... at... me..."

As soon as their eyes met, he couldn't help but recall their confrontation in the Room of Hidden Things. That had been the only time he'd ever addressed Harry by his given name.

*"I've never been anything but Potter to you! Lazy, arrogant, no different than my father. Isn't that what you've always said?"*

Indeed, he'd been mistaken. Terribly so. But even when he'd changed his perspective, determined to find comparisons to Lily instead, he hadn't been doing Harry any favors. The boy might've inherited his mother's compassion, her stubbornness and strong will. Above all things though, Harry was simply... himself.

Yes, Severus could've easily imagined that the eyes gazing into his were Lily's. After all, they were virtually identical. But as much as he longed for one last look at the woman he loved, he knew that it was Harry who deserved to be seen.

Unfortunately, he couldn't manage it for long. His vision was growing hazy, his eyelids beginning to droop. He could no longer draw enough breath to utter an apology, though he hoped that somehow, the boy would understand.

*"No, wait!"*

But he could no longer resist the beckoning darkness. He closed his eyes, releasing his breath in one last, shuddering sigh.

## 83. His Mother's Eyes

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### Chapter 83: His Mother's Eyes

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"Is he dead?" Ron whispered.

Harry didn't bother to answer, nor could he bring himself to feel for a pulse. Snape's skin was still warm, blood hot as it oozed out from between his fingers. He pressed down harder, ignoring the ashen pallor of his former professor's face.

His professor? No, his nemesis. Traitor. Murderer. Death Eater. This was a man who despised him, who would've been thrilled to hand him over to Voldemort.

Then again...

*"Go, Potter. Take your friends and go."*

"Come on, Harry," Hermione said, sounding shaken. "You did your best."

"We can't just leave him like this."

"Look at him," Ron said. "He's not even breathing."

Harry glanced at Snape, disheartened by what he saw. The man was as white as a marble statue, lying so still he might've been sculpted from stone. Even the texture of his skin had started to fit the comparison, growing cooler and more clammy by the second.

"Harry..."

Was it his imagination, or had Snape's chest risen and fallen ever so slightly? Holding his breath, he moved his free hand to the uninjured side of Snape's neck, fumbling for a pulse.

"He's..."

Harry gasped as a pair of unseen hands closed over his shoulders. Before he could do anything to stop it, he was shifted off to one side, scrambling for his wand as a streak of red light flew over his head.

With that, the figure beside him materialized, the subtle shimmer of Disillusionment giving way to solid flesh. The woman was on her knees, her face a mask of anguish as she stared down at Snape. She laid her hand on his neck, probing desperately until she detected the thread of a pulse Harry had felt just a minute before.

"Oh god," she said, her voice catching on a sob. "He's alive."

"Professor Burbage?"

That was Ron, who'd thankfully lowered his wand. Harry opened his mouth to correct him, but then he closed it again, frowning as he took a closer look at the woman. Felicity?

No. Granted, there were still traces of blonde in her hair, her nose just a touch more pointed than he remembered. But there was no denying that this was *Charity* Burbage, former Muggle Studies professor.

Why had she pretended to be someone else? Had she been hiding from Voldemort? Harry supposed that would make sense, but why had she hidden the truth from her allies as well?

More importantly, what was her connection to Snape?

And there *was* a connection. Harry could see that. Tears streamed down her face as she pulled his head into her lap, reaching into his pocket in a gesture that seemed strangely intimate. Withdrawing a miniature sack, she enlarged it, sifting through what appeared to be a collection of potions as she cursed under her breath.

But her next words, addressed to Snape, were soft and gentle.

"Where is it, love? Where did you put it?"

Of course, Snape couldn't answer. He couldn't even hear her, lying pale and still as she lifted her head to scan the room with red rimmed eyes.

"Erm," Hermione said, stepping forward as she bent over to pluck something from the ground. "Is this what you're looking for?"

"Yes! Yes, oh thank you." Professor Burbage accepted the tiny vial, uncorking it before she brought it to Snape's lips. But then she hesitated, uncovering the wound on his neck instead. 'Topical,' she muttered under her breath. "I remember now."

With that, she dumped the noxious green liquid into the puncture marks.

What happened next was horrid. Snape's body gave a violent jerk, a thick, putrid steam rising from the wound. His mouth fell open, unleashing a terrible gurgling sound as he lifted a hand to claw at his throat.

"*No!*" Professor Burbage cried out, sounding quite unlike herself as she grabbed for his arm. "Let it work, Severus, please! Please, for me..."

Even in his unconscious state, Snape seemed stronger. He tore his arm out of her grip, almost knocking her over in his desperation.

"*Harry!*"

But Harry didn't need any prompting. He was already there, panting with exertion as he struggled to keep Snape's arm pinned to his side. At first, he didn't know if he could manage it, opening his mouth to call for Ron. But suddenly, Snape relaxed, his body going limp.

"What's happening?"

"I don't know," Professor Burbage responded in that same strange voice. "I don't know, I... oh, bloody hell! Not *now!*"

This time, it was *her* body that jerked, a whimper emerging from her throat as her expression twisted in pain. But no, it wasn't pain. Not exactly. Her face was *changing*... nose becoming smaller, more rounded, her skin growing more pale by the second. Her body transformed, too, seeming to grow taller and more slender.

Harry hesitated, staring at her uncertainly. She buried her face in her hands, leaving nothing exposed but hair that suddenly grew longer, darkening into a deep shade of red.

“Polyjuice?” he said quietly.

She nodded. “Harry, I’m...”

Snape groaned, a weak, pitiful sound that Harry could’ve never imagined him making in the past. Then again, he was starting to realize that a lot of things weren’t quite what they seemed. The woman, who obviously *wasn’t* Professor Burbage, bent her head close to Snape’s, her face still concealed by a curtain of hair. She pressed her fingers to the wound, obviously noticing the same thing that Harry had. The bleeding had slowed, flesh just a touch less ragged than it had been before.

Briefly, Harry wondered if she was hiding her face from him on purpose. But then he shook his head, realizing that was a selfish thought. She was just trying to help Snape, uncorking a vial of what looked like Blood Replenisher as she eased her fingers between his lips.

“Lil... Lil...”

Harry froze, certain he’d misheard. Why would *Snape*...

“Lily.”

Of course, they’d been friends once, hadn’t they? Snape and his mum? Before he’d called her that terrible name, long before he’d become a Death Eater...

Before he’d switched sides.

The prophecy. Hadn’t Dumbledore said that Snape regretted his actions? That...

Backing up a couple steps, Harry shot a glance at Ron and Hermione. They looked as bewildered as he felt, glancing from him to the pair on the floor and back again as if they expected *him* to explain. Right. As if he had any *idea* what the ruddy hell was going on.

Could Snape be hallucinating? That *would* make sense, considering all the blood he’d lost.

“I’m here, love. Drink.”

“T-too late.”

“No, Severus. It’s not. Now *drink*.”

The woman’s voice caught on a sob, but there was something commanding there, too. Whatever it was, Snape responded immediately, taking the potion down in a series of painful sounding swallows. He still hadn’t opened his eyes, tears squeezing out from the corners of his tightly closed lids. But there was a touch of color in his cheeks now, his breathing slightly less labored as he lapsed into unconsciousness again.

Only then did the woman lift her head, her eyes meeting Harry’s.

*Her* eyes? No, *his* eyes.

“Bloody hell,” Ron muttered from somewhere in the background.

That face... Harry had gazed at that face a hundred times, a thousand, laughing up at him from a dozen old photographs. Of course, she wasn't laughing now. She looked positively gutted, her cheeks wet with tears.

"Harry..."

Yes, he knew that face. Smiling with joy or twisted in grief, that face was unmistakable.

"Mum?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

"But you... you're *dead*." He shook his head vehemently, backing up until he was pressed against the wall. "They all said so, they..."

"Please, Harry, I can explain."

"They said you'd died to save me." He was panting now, his voice rising in pitch with each word. "They *said*..."

"I *did* die. Well, sort of."

"*Sort of*?" he echoed, giving her an incredulous look. "You can't... this is some kind of trick. It has to be."

For a moment, he thought she was going to get up and approach him. But Snape's head was still resting in her lap, one of her hands pressed against the wound to staunch the blood that had slowed to a faint trickle.

"It's not a trick," she said quietly. "My body was destroyed that night. My *body*, not my soul. It took me a long time to get it back."

Was she telling him she'd made a *Horcrux*? No, his mum would've never done something like that. She was...

For the first time, it occurred to Harry that he had no idea *who* Lily Potter had been. He knew what he'd been *told*, yes, but hadn't he been misled before? Hadn't he been raised to believe that his father was a hero, only to realize he'd been a shameless bully during his school years? What if there'd been some sort of darkness in his mum, too? Something that the adults around him had failed to mention?

"I don't understand," he said, unable to remember a time he'd ever felt so helpless.

"I know you don't," she replied, her voice gentle as she sifted through the bag of potions. She withdrew what looked like Strength Potion, urging Snape's mouth open again. "But if nothing else, I need you to know..."

"Snape?"

She blinked in apparent confusion. "What?"

"This has got something to do with *him*, doesn't it?"

"It does, Harry, but..."

Suddenly, Harry forgot all about his encounter with Snape in the Room of Requirement. He forgot what had happened when he'd found his former professor hovering on the brink of death. All he could remember were the bad parts — the suspicion, the hatred, that awful moment when all his worst fears had been confirmed. Snape the murderer. Snape the traitor. Snape... willing servant to a monster who knew very well how to elude death.

What if Voldemort had taught his followers a few tricks? Tricks that the greasy bastard might've used to bring his mum back, making sure she was under his control? Really, if he'd had *that* kind of power, why *wouldn't* he have used it? What better way to take revenge against James, not to mention Harry himself?

"What did he do to you?"

But even as Lily opened her mouth to respond, a high, cold voice echoed off the walls.

*"You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery."*

They all went silent except Snape, who let out a low moan.

*"Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste."*

Harry moved closer to Ron and Hermione, struggling to focus on Voldemort's words. It wasn't easy... not with his own mother just a few feet away, carefully cleaning the blood from Snape's neck.

*"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you."*

Lily's face went pale, her eyes meeting his. The look in those eyes was all the confirmation he needed, proof that this woman truly was his mother. Perhaps Dark magic could have been used to create some uncanny likeness, but love — *real* love — could never be faked.

*"I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences."*

Both Ron and Hermione began to speak as soon as Voldemort fell silent. They urged him not to listen, suggesting that they come up with a new plan. But Harry barely heard them. His attention was still focused on his mother, his need for an explanation more urgent than ever.

"Ron?"

"Yeah, mate?"

"You two head back up to the castle. I'll meet you there soon."

"We don't have much time," said Hermione.

"Ob-vi-ous-ly."

That had been Harry's first thought, though he hadn't voiced it aloud. He jumped, his eyes darting to the man lying prone on the floor. Snape was awake now, struggling to remain conscious as he rasped out a different word.

"Pen-sieve."

"Pensieve?" Lily repeated, her brow furrowed. "Severus, what..."

But he didn't answer, letting out a heavy sigh as his face went slack.

"Um, Mrs. Potter?"

"Call me Lily. Please."

Hermione nodded as she fished in her pocket. She withdrew a small vial, filled to the brim with silvery blue mist. "I think Professor Snape wanted Harry to look at his memories."

"Those belong to Severus?" Lily frowned. "How..."

Only then did Harry remember. He'd been preoccupied at the time, doing his best to staunch the flow of blood from Snape's wound. But distantly, he recalled the swirl of memories, along with the desperation in Snape's voice as he'd begged someone to take them.

"He gave them to me," he said, accepting the vial from Hermione. "Not sure why, but..."

To his surprise, Lily began to weep, stroking Snape's hair with gentle fingers as she leaned down to whisper in his ear. After a moment, she lifted her head, extending one arm as if to beckon Harry closer.

He hesitated, glancing at Ron and Hermione. They seemed to understand, slipping from the room without another word.

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Lily kept her hand outstretched, waiting patiently for Harry to join her. He was obviously still in shock, his expression slightly bewildered as he crossed the room.

Finally, he reached her side, his fingers brushing against hers. His hand was cold, trembling ever so slightly, his legs seeming to give out beneath him as he dropped to the floor beside her.

"Harry..."

"You're real," he said, staring down at their joined hands. "I mean, of course you are, but..."

"I know."

He needed the physical contact, she realized. Something solid, a dose of reality in a situation that had to seem like a dream. Even as she watched, that dazed look in his eyes faded, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"I have so many questions. I... I don't even know where to start."

She smiled. "I've been dreaming about this moment for years, and I still don't know what to tell you... how to explain..."

"What happened to you?" he interrupted. "How is this even possible? Where have you been for all this time, and why didn't anyone tell me? What does Snape have to do with it? Did Dumbledore know? What about Sirius and Remus?"

"Harry," she said quietly. "I wish I had time to answer your questions. But all of them require a lengthy explanation, and you only have..."



“An hour.” Harry shook his head. “Bloody hell.”

“You’ve still got the memories. They’ll help you understand.”

Harry glanced down at the vial, his expression uncertain. He opened his mouth as if to protest, but seemed to think better of it, giving his head a little shake.

“And you?” he said instead. “What will you do?”

In response, she looked down at Severus. His head was still resting in her lap, his face deathly pale other than a slight bit of color in his cheeks. She reached into the sack, pulling out another vial of Blood Replenisher.

“I can’t leave him,” she said as she urged his lips to part. “Not like this.”

“Will he live?”

“I can’t be sure yet, but... I hope so.”

Harry rose to his feet, hesitating at her side. “Sure you’ll be all right?”

“None of them have any reason to come here, but even if they do...” She looked up at him, attempting a smile. “Your mum happens to be a pretty good fighter.”

“Mum,” he repeated slowly, as if he still couldn’t believe it. “I... I guess we’ll talk later then.”

Something inside her twisted at his words, a sickening realization that dawned on her as she stared at the vial in his hand. Granted, she knew the truth now, but *he* wouldn’t. He’d have to believe, at least for a little while, that there was no escaping death.

To make matters worse, he’d be getting that information from Severus’s memories, which would make it clear that Lily had known about his fate as well.

How would he feel about that? When he dwelled on what would seem like their first and final meeting, wouldn’t he wonder why she’d let him go without protest? Maybe it would seem like she’d reconciled herself with the idea of losing him, but what if it didn’t? What if her relative calm made him think that she didn’t care?

Of course, there was an easy fix for that. She’d been struggling all night to maintain her composure — letting it slip was effortless. All she had to do was look down at Severus’s ashen face, the way he still grimaced with pain even though he was unconscious. The next thing she knew, her eyes were flooded with tears, though it wasn’t until she glanced up at Harry that she began to sob.

She knew he’d be all right. Of course she did. She knew it because Dumbledore had said so, because it was simply too painful to believe otherwise. But just the thought of what he had to face...

“Don’t cry,” Harry said, patting his back as he knelt beside her. “I’ll be okay, really.”

With that, she only cried harder, realizing that he only had a few minutes left to believe that.

“H-Harry...”

She didn't know how she ended up with her face pressed against his shoulder, but suddenly, she was clinging to him as if she'd never let him go. Their embrace was awkward, her movements limited by Severus's head, which was still pillowed in her lap. Nonetheless, she squeezed Harry a little tighter, her breath catching in her throat as a familiar sensation rippled through her belly.

It seemed impossible, but she'd completely forgotten she was pregnant. This was the first time the baby had stirred since she'd entered the Shrieking Shack, and of course, she hadn't switched positions since she'd dropped to her knees at Severus's side. Combined with her distress over his injury, not to mention her emotional reunion with Harry? She'd had little room to think about anything else.

Should she tell him? With the way she'd been hunched over Severus, he obviously hadn't noticed yet.

"Harry..."

He pulled back, giving her a questioning look. Only then did she realize that he'd been crying, too, wet splotches glistening on his skin. His face was pale with fatigue, dark smudges under eyes that looked far too haunted for anyone so young.

"Yeah?" he said after a moment.

"I wanted to tell you... I mean, I'd like to give you something." Conjuring a flask, she touched her wand to her temple, withdrawing a handful of silvery strands. "Take these to the Pensieve, too."

"Okay." He rose, accepting the vial and stuffing it in his pocket. "Are you sure..."

"I'll be fine," she finished for him. "Best get going now."

He nodded, mumbling an awkward farewell as he turned and left the room. It was all she could do not to call out to him, beg for his forgiveness, tell him how desperately she loved him. But of course, there wasn't time for that, nor did she think he was ready for it. He deserved to know the truth... only then could he be expected to decide how he felt about her.

As for her biggest secret... Lily pressed a hand to her stomach, closing her eyes as she felt the baby stirring inside her. She wished she could've told Harry herself, but she hadn't wanted him to make the wrong assumptions. He was still far too suspicious of Severus — for all she knew, he might've come to the conclusion that she'd been impregnated by force.

Shaking her head, she turned her attention to Severus. It wasn't time to give him another potion quite yet, so she conjured a cloth instead. Dampening it with warm water, she wiped the blood from his skin, smiling as he murmured in approval. It was the first sound she'd heard from him that wasn't full of pain, a clear indication that his condition was improving.

Still, he had a long way to go. His potion might've neutralized the venom somewhat, but there was a sickly pallor to his skin that went beyond blood loss.

As for his wound... she changed the bandage as quickly as she could, wincing as she inspected the raw, ragged opening. Just the sight of it was painful — she couldn't begin to imagine how agonizing it must be for him.

“I wish there was something else I could do,” she said quietly, though she knew it was out of her hands. What he needed now was rest, a chance for his body to heal as the potions worked their magic.

With that thought in mind, she picked up a piece of rubbish, transfiguring it into a pillow. Carefully, she eased his head off her lap, making sure he was settled before she transfigured a scrap of paper into a warm woolen blanket.

“That’s better, hmmm?” She brushed the hair back from his forehead, pressing a kiss to his brow.

Finally, she heaved herself to her feet, stiff muscles groaning in protest. She didn’t need a mirror to tell her she looked hideous — her dress was caked with Severus’s blood, her breasts and belly sseeming to bulge grotesquely against the tight fabric. She was filthy from sitting on the floor, not to mention her hair, which was an absolute mess.

This was hardly the time for vanity. She knew that, even as she set about the business of cleaning herself up. If nothing else, it gave her something to do, a way to pass the time as she allowed Severus to rest. She cast a cleansing spell over her skin, raking her hands through her hair and weaving it into a neat braid.

Following that, she stripped off her dress, her thoughts returning to Harry as she glanced down at her stomach. Yes, she’d been right not to tell him. The memories would be far better, a chance for him to see all the love that had passed between her and Severus before her pregnancy had ever come into question. Granted, Harry was bound to have conflicted feelings, but wouldn’t it help him to know that she’d never been mistreated? He might be able to look on Severus a little more kindly, which could go a long way in healing the rift between them.

Satisfied with this conclusion, she transfigured her dress into a loose cotton robe. She’d just slipped it on when she heard a noise behind her.

“L-L-Lil...”

“Severus!” she gasped, nearly stumbling as she rushed to his side.

## 84. Snape and Lily's Tale

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### Chapter 84: Snape and Lily's Tale

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Harry uncapped the vial containing Snape's memories, holding his breath as he poured them into the Pensieve.

He knew that these memories were more important than Lily's, at least where Voldemort was concerned. Hadn't Snape said he had an urgent message to pass along? He wished he'd been willing to listen, though at the time, he'd had no reason to believe that Snape was anything other than a lying, murdering traitor.

Now? He didn't know *what* to think. He'd been convinced that Snape was on Voldemort's side, but if that were the case, why had he let him go?

And he *had* let him go. Harry could no longer pretend otherwise, couldn't keep telling himself that he'd had a series of lucky escapes. That excuse might've worked when Dumbledore was alive, but what about the night he'd been killed? As much as it pained Harry to admit it, he was no match for Snape. The man could've easily delivered him to Voldemort, even if that *had* been his reason for not killing him on the spot.

What had stopped him? And why had he let Harry slip through his clutches tonight, not just once but twice? He could've captured him in the Room of Requirement — with Ron and Hermione bound and silenced, it would've been no contest. And what about the corridor? Harry had been stunned from the Fiendfyre, practically defenseless, yet what had Snape done? What had he *said*?

*"Go, Potter. Take your friends and go."*

He'd been almost... well, not *kind*, exactly. But there'd been none of that seething resentment, no trace of hatred to be seen. What had changed? And *why*?

Harry gazed into the basin, hypnotized by the swirl of Snape's memories. Perhaps they'd be enough to answer *some* of his questions, but what about his mum?

The woman he'd met *was* Lily. He knew that much, even if he couldn't explain why. He'd seen it in her eyes, heard it in the way she spoke to him, like traces of some distant memory he couldn't quite recall. Some part of him had instantly recognized her as his mother, leaving him unable to deny the truth.

Lily Potter was alive. But *how*? What had happened to her, and what did Snape have to do with it? Where had she been for all these years, and why had she chosen tonight of all nights to return? Was *she* responsible for Snape's peculiar behavior? If so, then why...

Shaking his head, Harry uncorked the other vial, dumping the contents into the Pensieve. He didn't know whether he was supposed to mix the two, but somehow, it was the only thing that made sense.

The memories swirled together, soon indistinguishable from one another. Taking a deep breath, he leaned forward, plunging his face into the basin.

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Disoriented by the brilliant sunlight, it took him a minute to spot the boy. He knew right away that it was Snape — there was no mistaking that lank black hair, not to mention the overly large nose. But there was something in his face that Harry had never seen there before. It was a loneliness he immediately recognized, an intense yearning for friendship he knew all too well. He remembered feeling that way before he'd gone to Hogwarts, long before...

As soon as he saw Lily, Harry lost his train of thought. She wasn't the only girl on the swings, but she captured all the attention, her red hair like a living flame beneath the afternoon sun. Snape watched her hungrily, jumping at the opportunity to speak with her when she came near.

Despite himself, Harry couldn't help feeling sorry for this younger version of Snape. He'd never seen anyone so desperate to make a good impression, nor so ill-equipped to do so. Snape's disappointment was painful to watch, though of course, the story didn't end there. Lily had obviously decided to give him another chance, though whether that was due to their shared secret or just a simple act of kindness, Harry couldn't say.

The scenes dissolved and reformed, showing him glimpses of Snape and Lily's childhood. With each one, the bond between them grew stronger, their eyes full of anticipation as they eagerly awaited their Hogwarts letters. Throughout it all, one thing was abundantly clear. Snape had adored his mother, a feeling that had obviously been mutual.

*"Does it make a difference, being Muggleborn?"*

"No," said Snape, his voice gentle as he studied her little face. *"It doesn't make any difference."*

Of course, Lily wasn't the the only person to be found in Snape's memories. Petunia had been there from the start, filled with jealousy and spite toward her sister. Poor Lily... she'd tried so hard to get along with Petunia, receiving nothing but abuse in return.

*"You think I want to be a freak? You and that Snape boy... weirdos..."*

The memories of Hogwarts were more difficult to watch, perhaps because Harry knew what was coming. He shook his head as James and Sirius bullied Snape on the train, a scene that reminded him of the first day he'd met Draco. He knew now that a person's entire future could be dictated by what House they belonged to. Hell, if Sirius had wound up in Slytherin, he and Snape might've even been friends.

Of course, that hadn't happened. Sirius had gotten his wish, followed by years of animosity between the Marauders and Snape. Honestly, Harry was surprised that Snape and Lily had managed to remain friends for as long as they did, realizing that James in particular had been determined to drive them apart. He'd refused to leave Lily alone, even when she'd made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with him.

*"I know James Potter's an arrogant toerag. I don't need you to tell me that."*

Harry frowned, struggling to make sense of it all. Sirius and Remus had defended his father, explaining that he'd outgrown his bullying ways. But he'd never stopped targeting Snape, had he? No, they'd admitted that themselves. So why would Lily...

The timing of the next memory couldn't have been better. He'd seen it before, of course, shocked by his father's cruel indifference as he'd tormented Snape. This time, he focused on the details, watching the twitch of Lily's mouth. That had obviously been what set Snape off, a final humiliation that had been too much to bear. But what James had done...

Before Harry could finish the thought, he was whisked away to the entrance of Gryffindor Tower. He stood at the top of the stairs, listening to a brief, heated conversation between Snape and Lily.

*"I can't pretend anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."*

With that, he was thrust into a different memory, though this time, Snape was nowhere to be seen. There was only Lily, flashing James a wan smile as he offered to carry her books.

Gradually, Harry began to understand that it was his mother's loneliness that had drawn her to James. She might've been the one who'd cut Snape out of her life, but it was obvious she'd suffered for it. Even when she'd started spending most of her time with the Marauders, her eyes had been drawn to him, her expression wistful whenever he was near.

For James's part, he *did* seem more mature. His arrogance had disappeared, along with the unwelcome advances. Instead, he was patient and kind with Lily, generous with compliments or teasing remarks that never failed to make her smile. She'd obviously enjoyed his attentions, though Harry couldn't help but notice that their relationship was quite different than the one she'd shared with Snape. It was as if Lily had locked part of herself away, a side of her personality that James had never seemed to miss.

Still, he was comforted by what he saw of their relationship. It was obvious that his mum had never been mistreated, that she'd even been happy with James. That was especially clear in later memories, their affection for one another having deepened into genuine love.

Before Harry knew it, they were married, followed by flashes of domestic life. He saw himself as a newborn cradled in his mother's arms, her eyes shining with pride as she'd handed him to his father. But then suddenly, he was swept away once more, deposited on a hilltop in the dead of night.

Snape. Harry had almost forgotten about Snape. He was a few years older now, his face etched with faint lines that would deepen over time.

*"Don't kill me!"*

*"That was not my intention."*

Dumbledore's expression was fierce, his eyes cold as he stared down at the man who knelt at his feet.

*"The prophecy did not refer to a woman. It spoke of a boy born at the end of July..."*

*"You know what I mean!"* Snape interrupted, his voice frantic. *"He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down..."*

Harry already knew that Snape had delivered the prophecy to Voldemort, though this scene definitely confirmed what Dumbledore had said. Whether or not they'd been on opposite sides, Snape had never wished his mother harm.

*"Keep her — them — safe. Please."*

*"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"*

*"Anything."*

Obviously, this was the night that Snape had switched sides, agreeing to be Dumbledore's spy. Could it be that he'd been loyal all along, despite so much evidence to the contrary?

*"Dumbledore was already dying. His death, along with the manner in which it happened, was arranged between us."*

Was that true? Snape had *seemed* sincere, but...

Before Harry could dwell on his own memory, he was transported to Godric's Hollow. He braced himself, expecting to hear his mother's screams, though the only cries he heard were his own. Voldemort had already gone, leaving her dead on the floor.

She was dead. Harry could see that as Snape crawled past him, pulling her body into his arms. There was no trace of color in her face, her eyes blank as they stared up at the ceiling.

*"No, Lily, no... I'm sorry..."*

But this wasn't Snape's memory. It was Lily's, so how *could* she be dead?

*"My body was destroyed that night,"* she'd told him in the Shrieking Shack. *"My body, not my soul."*

Thoroughly confused now, Harry stared at Snape, overwhelmed by the intensity of his grief. There was no denying that he'd loved Lily, nor that he'd truly believed she was dead.

Abruptly, the scene shifted, transporting Harry to a place that was all too familiar. He stood on the porch at 4 Privet Drive, watching the door swing open to reveal his aunt and uncle.

*"Dear god! What the hell is that?"*

*"It appears to be a baby, Vernon."*

Only then did he notice the basket, gazing down at an infant version of himself as he came to an odd realization. Lily had been here with him, fully aware of what was happening. But *how*? If her soul had survived, where was it? Even Horcruxes had *some* kind of presence, a tangible object that kept them anchored to the world.

By that point, Harry understood that neither Snape or Lily had included any memories by accident. Each had a specific purpose, something that one or the other felt he needed to know. He kept this in mind during the next scene, for all that it seemed uneventful.

*"I suppose you're hungry. Could use a change as well..."*

Aunt Petunia lifted the baby out of his basket, nearly dropping him as she let out a scream.

*"Bloody vermin!"*

Harry only caught a brief glimpse the mouse before it disappeared under the refrigerator. Doing his best to ignore Petunia's hysterical shrieking, he wondered what it was that Lily was trying to tell him. Was *she* an Animagus? That would make sense, he supposed, especially since she'd been friends with the Marauders.

Then again, why wouldn't Sirius or Remus have told him? And why would her animal form be a *mouse*, of all things? She'd never been a pest like Peter Pettigrew or Rita Skeeter — wouldn't she have turned into something that fit her personality?

*"Come on,"* Petunia said as she left the room. *"I'm going to lose my breakfast if I have to smell your stench any longer."*

No, his mum *couldn't* have been an Animagus. That wouldn't have saved her from the Killing Curse, nor would it have kept her away for all these years. If she could've just switched back to human form...

The mouse crept out from under the refrigerator, stopping dead in its tracks as it caught sight of its reflection. Harry knew then that it was Lily, though he couldn't begin to understand what it meant.

Abruptly, the memory shifted, leaving him standing in Dumbledore's office.

*"I thought... you were going... to keep her... safe..."*

Snape's voice was hoarse with grief, his expression haggard as he listened to Dumbledore's reply. He didn't receive an apology, nor did he seem to expect one. Clearly, he'd already decided that he had no one to blame but himself.

*"Her son lives. He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"*

*"Don't! Gone... dead..."*

*"Is this remorse, Severus?"*

Harry frowned at Dumbledore, surprised by the lack of sympathy in his voice.

*"I wish... I wish I were dead."*

*"And what use would that be to anyone? If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."*

*"What... what do you mean?"*

Harry stared at Dumbledore in disbelief, realizing what he was attempting to do. No wonder he'd said nothing to comfort Snape. He was trying to manipulate him with his own grief, willing to do whatever it took to make sure he stayed on the side of the Light.

In one way, perhaps that was understandable. But was it really necessary? It seemed like Snape would've been loyal either way, without any need to use his suffering against him.

*"You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son."*



Protect *him*? Harry's eyes flew from one to the other, watching Snape's mouth twist into a grimace.

*"He doesn't need protection. The Dark Lord has gone."*

*"The Dark Lord will return,"* Dumbledore said quietly, *"and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does."*

Snape stared down at his hands, seeming to wrestle with some inner conflict. When he lifted his head, his eyes were fixed on Dumbledore's, never wavering as he spoke.

*"Very well, but never... never tell, Dumbledore. This must be between us. Swear it! I cannot bear... especially Potter's son. I want your word!"*

*"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you? If you insist..."*

The memory dissolved, leaving Harry standing in the front hall at 4 Privet Drive. He wasn't surprised to find Petunia there, her expression sour as she peered through a crack in the door. But when he saw who was waiting on the other side...

*"Get in here!"*

Snape stalked into the foyer, black robes billowing behind him. Turning to face Petunia, he smirked at her obvious discomfort.

*"Okay, spit it out,"* she said.

*"I've come here to inform you that if any harm comes to Lily's son while under your care, you will deeply and repeatedly regret it by the time I'm through with you. Do I make myself clear?"*

Harry stared at him, struggling to process this new reality. Had Snape really been protecting him all these years? That was hard to imagine as he remembered his former professor's obvious dislike, the apparent lack of concern for his well-being.

And yet he *definitely* seemed to care now, his eyes blazing as he snarled at Petunia.

*"How dare you stand here whining about a minor inconvenience, when your own sister... at least you still have a life to ruin. Don't fucking talk to me about fair when Lily isn't even cold in her grave."*

With that, he spun on his heel, driving his fist into the wall.

*"Are you insane?"*

*"Close enough,"* Snape said, his voice dripping with malice. *"I wouldn't try my patience, at any rate."*

The memory didn't end there, for which Harry was grateful. He needed a minute to collect his thoughts, a chance to figure out what it all meant. That was easier to do when the house fell quiet again, a soft rustle drawing his eyes to the rodent as it disappeared into the cupboard under the stairs.

He followed it into the cramped space, watching as it joined the baby in his makeshift crib. This younger version of Harry didn't seem to mind, letting out a happy gurgle as the mouse

settled itself beside him.

And then Harry recognized the truth, even as several more memories flew by in quick succession. Lily had been with him all along, intervening on his behalf whenever she could get away with it. He still didn't understand what had happened to her, but...

Finding himself at Mrs. Figg's house, he watched in alarm as a huge Maine Coon pounced on the mouse. Obviously, he knew that Lily had managed to escape somehow, though he *definitely* wasn't expecting what happened next. As soon as the creatures locked eyes, the mouse scampered away, quickly forgotten as the cat turned its attention to him.

"Shut up, will you?"

He winced as the younger version of Harry threw a pillow at the cat, though she didn't seem particularly bothered. Ignoring all his attempts to chase her off, she kept jumping on the bed, refusing to give up until he allowed her to cuddle up beside him.

As he watched the next few memories, Harry began to understand that Lily had been able to switch to different animals at will. He saw her as a bird, a spider, even as a puppy, remembering how Dudley had thrown a fit when his new pet had preferred his cousin.

So many things were starting to make sense, though each revelation seemed to create a dozen more questions. If his mum had been able to switch to other animals, why not humans? Had she ever tried? It seemed like she would have, if only to...

Harry lost his train of thought as he arrived at Hogwarts, distracted by dozens of familiar faces. These memories flew by even faster, showing him a glimpse of Dumbledore telling Snape to keep an eye on Professor Quirrell, followed by one of Lily's memories from Gryffindor Tower. He saw nothing more of her until his third year, his mouth falling open as he realized she'd been inhabiting Crookshanks.

And then the pieces fell into place. The inexplicable hatred for Scabbers, along with an intelligence that had seemed more human than animal? Right. Lily must've known that the rat was Peter Pettigrew, though that would have to mean...

Before Harry could finish the thought, he spotted Crookshanks in the Forbidden Forest, facing off with a large black dog that was all too familiar. Both animals were silent, but judging by their behavior, it was obvious that they'd found a way to communicate. Sirius's hostility gave way to confusion, his head cocked to one side like he was trying to make sense of the situation.

Had Sirius known that Lily was alive? If so, why hadn't he...

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Swept away once more, Harry found himself at 12 Grimmauld Place. His godfather was seated in an armchair, flipping through a book as a calico cat peered over his shoulder.

*"We could just tell him the truth, you know."*

Yes, Sirius had known about Lily. He'd even been able to communicate with her in human form, waiting for her reply before he spoke again.

*“And yet you wanted to tell Sniv...”* He hesitated as the cat hissed. *“Tell Snape. Whatever. I still don’t get it, Lils. Why him and not Remus?”*

Harry wished he could hear his mother’s response, though it wasn’t difficult to understand the gist of it. Sirius slammed the book shut, scowling as he reached for a different one.

*“I’ll tell Remus, Dumbledore, the Weasleys, you name it. I’ll tell Harry himself if you like. But Snape? No way in hell.”*

The cat glared at him for a minute, then turned and stalked away. Before she’d left the room, however, Sirius let out a gasp.

*“My God, Lily. I think I’ve found something.”*

The next few memories were brief, though they helped Harry understand that Sirius and his mother had argued more often than not. She’d obviously wanted Sirius to tell Snape, refusing to even consider anyone else. Why? Harry couldn’t make sense of it, though at the same time, he also wondered why Sirius wouldn’t just do as she asked. Sure, Snape wouldn’t have been Harry’s first choice either, but...

*“That’s not a cat.”*

Harry only saw bits and pieces of this scene, an ugly confrontation between Sirius and Snape. He didn’t know who’d started the conflict, but both had their wands drawn, their expressions murderous. The scene faded, only to reappear with a cry of, *“Legilimens!”*

Abruptly, Sirius shifted to his Animagus form, breaking the connection. Snape stumbled backward, his expression haunted as he slumped against the wall.

*“What,”* he said slowly, *“does Lily have to do with this?”*

Sirius didn’t reply, refusing to switch back to human form. On one hand, Harry couldn’t blame him, but on the other, it was obvious that Snape was just trying to get some answers. Why wouldn’t Sirius tell him, especially since it was information that Lily herself wanted him to have?

Finally, there was a flash of blue light, forcing Sirius to transform. Snape waited for him to retrieve his wand, his own held at the ready.

*“If you insist on a duel,”* he said, *“I’ll be happy to oblige you. But in your case...”*

Harry didn’t hear the rest, his attention focused on the cat. She was obviously arguing with Sirius, a low hiss emanating from her throat as they glared at one another. But just when it seemed that Sirius would take the secret to his grave, he lowered his wand, his eyes meeting Snape’s.

*“I didn’t name the cat after Lily. She is Lily. What do you think of that?”*

Harry never saw Snape fire the Stunner. By the time Sirius hit the floor, he was already gone.

The next scene transported Harry to a place he didn't recognize. He found himself in a shabby looking kitchen, scanning the room for any sign of life. He knew this was Lily's memory — hers were softer than Snape's, shapes and colors more gentle. But where was she? Why had she brought him here?

Catching a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, he turned to look at the kitchen table. It was covered in a thick layer of dust, with the exception of a single line as a caterpillar crawled across its surface.

Harry knew it was Lily by the time she'd finished the first letter, watching in fascination as she etched out a message.

*LIGATIS ANIMALIA*  
*GRIMMAULD PLACE*  
*SMALL GRAY JOURNAL*

She'd barely finished when Harry heard someone approach, though the memory faded before he had a chance to see who it was. When the world righted itself again, Snape was seated in an armchair, taking a deep breath as he opened the journal.

Harry moved forward to peer over his shoulder, glad he was a fast reader as Snape flipped through the pages.

*Ligatis Animalia... could it be possible? Had I bound my husband's soul to this creature?*

The next thing he knew, Snape was trembling, his cheeks wet with tears as his black eyes found the cat's green ones.

*"This is what happened to you? That night he came for you, he... he..."* Snape hesitated, struggling to compose himself. *"Lily... you're alive?"*

The cat nodded.

And then Harry was thrust back into Snape's memories, finding himself standing in the middle of Dumbledore's office. He saw the old headmaster slumped over in his chair, his expression haggard as Snape entered the room.

"My god," said Snape. "What have you done?"

With that, he rushed away, returning with a small collection of potions. Harry could see it now — the blackness beginning to spread across Dumbledore's hand. Snape managed to bring it under control, though there was genuine regret in his eyes as he informed Dumbledore that his days were numbered. A year, perhaps?

Snape had been telling the truth. Harry knew that now, horrified by the scene as it unfolded.

*"You must kill me."*

*"If you don't mind dying, why not let Draco do it?"*

*"That boy's soul is not yet so damaged. I would not have it ripped apart on my account."*

When Snape responded, his voice was no more than a whisper. *"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"*

Abruptly, the scene shifted. Dumbledore and Snape were walking outside Hogwarts, one demanding answers even as the other cheerfully withheld them.

*"After you have killed me, Severus..."*

*"You refuse to tell me everything, yet you expect that small service of me! You take a great deal for granted, Dumbledore! Perhaps I have changed my mind!"*

*"Come to my office tonight, Severus, at eleven, and you shall not complain that I have no confidence in you..."*

In the blink of an eye, Harry was back in Dumbledore's office, unnerved by the headmaster's expression as he circled around Snape. There was something different about this memory... it seemed more focused somehow, slower to unfold than the others. Was this the message that Snape had been trying to give him?

*"If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection, then I think it will be safe to tell Harry."*

Snape frowned. *"Tell him what?"*

Dumbledore's response was slow in coming, his words like icy fingers inching their way up Harry's spine. His connection with Voldemort, the glimpses into his mind, even his ability to speak to snakes... was Dumbledore saying that Harry himself was a Horcrux? But that would mean...

*"So the boy must die?"* said Snape.

*"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."*

*"I thought... all these years... that we were protecting him for her. For Lily."*

*"We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength..."*

Whatever Harry had expected from Snape's memories, it wasn't this. Dumbledore's voice was calm, almost casual, while Snape — Snape! — was visibly horrified by the prospect of his death.

*"I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter..."*

*"But this is touching, Severus. Have you grown to care for the boy after all?"*

*"For him?"* Snape snarled. *"Expecto Patronum!"*

Of course, Harry knew that it wasn't about him. He already knew what the Patronus would be, not surprised in the least as a silver doe bounded across the room. What *did* surprise him were the tears in Dumbledore's eyes, the amazement in his voice as he spoke again.

*"After all this time?"*

*"Always,"* said Snape.

With that, the memories sped up, rushing Harry toward his inevitable fate. He saw Snape talking to Dumbledore's portrait, making arrangements for a battle he remembered all too well. And then there was Snape participating in the battle itself, accidentally severing George's ear as he attempted to strike out at a nearby Death Eater. He saw glimpses of the awful punishment Snape had endured when the battle was over, the price he'd paid for Voldemort's failure.

Meanwhile, Snape struggled to find a solution for Lily, his desperation becoming more obvious with each failure. He seemed increasingly aware of his dangerous position, even meeting up with Petunia when he'd run out of other ideas.

*"I need your blood."*

*"What?!"*

*"Not much. A few small vials should do the trick."*

*"Are you insane?!"*

Petunia had been horrified by the suggestion, though in the end, it seemed that Snape had gotten what he'd wanted. The next scene showed him in the Forbidden Forest, tipping one of those vials into a huge cauldron. He dragged a knife across his forearm, adding his own blood to the mixture, extinguishing the fire before he turned to address the cat.

*"Are you ready?"*

Carefully, he lowered her into the potion, though Harry certainly wasn't expecting what happened next. He heard the faintest echo of his mother's voice, wisps of what appeared to be her soul floating away on the summer wind.

The next scene showed Snape in Sirius's bedroom, his face twisted with grief as he tore the room apart. He thought he'd truly lost her this time, his body shaking with sobs as he stared down at the photograph.

*"Fuck, Lily. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."*

But that wasn't the end, was it? No, Snape was back at the cauldron now, bleeding into the potion all over again as he withdrew the picture from his pocket. And then suddenly, Harry was back in his mother's memory, staring at her silhouette as she rose from the mist. He saw Snape wrap a cloak around her shoulders, both of them shaking as he pulled her to his chest.

*"Did it work?"*

*"Yes, Lily. It worked."*

The memory shifted, dank forest replaced by a suite of rooms decorated in shades of plum and silver. Harry came to understand that these were the Headmaster's quarters, where Lily had been hiding for the better part of the year. He saw glimpses of the life she'd shared with Snape, unable to ignore the gentle words and lingering touches that passed between them.

His own mother... in love with *Snape*? Harry shook his head, deciding not to dwell on it. He wanted to make the most of her memories while he still had the chance, not linger over the parts he didn't understand. What mattered was that she really *was* alive, not to mention that she truly did love him. What more could he hope for?

As for Snape...

*"I've said things, done things that you'll find unfair, harsh, even cruel. I can't take those things back, Lily."*

No, he couldn't, though Harry had begun to understand the reasons for his behavior. Did that make it forgivable? In some ways, especially when Harry remembered that Snape had never been a traitor, not to mention that he'd done everything in his power to protect him and his mother. But...

*"Over the past couple years, my feelings have... changed somewhat. I'm willing to admit that I've been too hard on the boy at times."*

Was that true, or had he only said it to please Lily? Granted, he was a skilled liar, but what about the Room of Requirement? What about the Shrieking Shack? It wasn't only what he'd said to Harry, but the way he'd *looked* at him. There'd been genuine regret in those eyes, but also... recognition? It was as if he'd never truly seen Harry until that moment, as if...

Abruptly, the scene shifted, leaving Harry standing in Dumbledore's office. *Snape's* office, he reminded himself, not nearly as bothered by the distinction as he would've been a few hours ago.

*"I think you underestimate him,"* Snape told the portrait. *"You assume he won't go through with it if he knows his fate in advance. I disagree. The boy has his share of flaws, but a lack of courage isn't one of them."*

*"Why, Severus, that almost sounded like a compliment."*

*"Compliment? No. A simple statement of fact."*

*"A fact you've never stated before. You always said he was lazy, arrogant..."*

*"Did I ever call him a coward?"*

The portrait hesitated. *"No, not that I recall."*

*"Precisely,"*

The memories didn't end there, though Harry couldn't bring himself to look at the rest. He pulled his head out of the Pensieve, struggling for composure as he stared at the swirl of memories. Only then did he realize that he'd been right — they were meant to be viewed together, as closely entwined as the people to which they belonged.

But Harry was a part of that story, too. He was a reminder of all the things that had torn Snape and Lily apart, yes, but also the one thing that had brought them back together. It was all so simple... far more simple than he could've ever realized. Snape had hated Harry for the loss of his mother, though not nearly as much as he'd hated himself. Only when Lily had returned had he been able to see clearly, her ability to forgive echoed by his own change of perspective.

Harry sighed, lifting his head to stare at Dumbledore's empty portrait. He still had dozens of questions, most of which would never be answered. But if the memories had shown him anything, it was the need for forgiveness, the meaning of bravery, not to mention the hope to be found in second chances.

Most of all? They'd helped him understand how powerful love could be, that it was worth living for, fighting for, even dying for should the need arise. He might never have the chance to truly know the people who'd taught him that lesson, but there was one thing he knew for sure. Both Snape and Lily had been ready to give their life for him, willing to do whatever it took to keep him safe.

If nothing else, at least he'd been given a chance to return the favor.



## 85. Out Of the Shadows

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### Chapter 85: Out Of the Shadows

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Severus panted harshly, struggling to remain conscious. His clothing was soaked through, the air thick with noxious odors as Lily unbuttoned his frock coat. She wiped the perspiration from his chest, faint traces of green appearing on the snowy white cloth.

It was a harrowing ordeal, his body trembling as he struggled to sweat the venom out. He was freezing, yet hotter than he'd ever been, wondering how much more he could take.

"Bla..." he rasped. "Lil... Bla..."

"Blanket?" She frowned. "Severus, you're burning up!"

Shaking his head in frustration, he groaned as the movement sent a jolt of pain through his neck. He couldn't speak after that, begging her with his eyes to do as he'd asked.

"All right," she said, her expression dubious as she draped it over him.

The effect was instantaneous. He began to shake more violently, his vision blurring as sweat poured into his eyes. Blinking it away, he grunted, desperate to stop Lily from pulling the blanket off.

And then he remembered.

"P... Pock..."

"Pocket?"

He inclined his head slightly, though the effort cost him dear. Gritting his teeth against the pain, his eyes followed Lily as she searched through the pockets of his frock coat, followed by his outer robes. He grunted again as she picked up his cloak, hoping like hell that she'd be able to...

"The coin! How could I have forgotten?"

Laying it in his open palm, she retrieved her own, watching it intently.

*More blankets.*

"It's making it worse!"

*Want to get it over with. Please, Lily.*

Shaking her head, she replaced the first blanket, transfiguring a second and a third before he indicated that it was enough. What happened next was hellish. There was no other way to describe it, his throat tortured by every ragged groan as his body shuddered, forcefully expelling the venom. But he managed to hold onto the coin, instructing Lily not to interfere.

And then just as suddenly, it was over, his muscles going limp as his eyes fluttered closed. He felt Lily bathing him with a cool, damp cloth, his temperature returning to normal as she cast a drying charm over his clothes.

The worst was over. He knew that now, though he also understood that he was nowhere near recovered. Healing would be a slow, painful process, evidenced by the relentless throbbing of his open wound.

*Blood Replenisher.*

Lily brought the vial to his lips, her eyes wet with tears. For her sake, he tried not to wince as he swallowed, the potion blazing a trail of fire down his ravaged throat. But he managed to finish it, relieved to feel some small measure of strength returning to his limbs. Now that the venom was out of his system, whatever potions he took could work properly.

*Strength Potion.*

“Maybe you should rest for a few minutes. Your throat...”

*Now.*

Obedying without further protest, Lily dosed him a second time. He accepted a bit of water and then chose to take her advice, feeling slightly better as he drifted off into a light slumber.

He woke up to find himself stronger, his eyes flickering to Lily as he dragged a finger across the surface of his coin.

*How long has it been?*

“Not long,” she said quietly. “20 minutes, maybe?”

*Any word?*

Of course, he didn’t expect Harry to return, nor anyone else for that matter. As such, he was surprised when Lily nodded.

“He’s on his way to the Forbidden Forest.”

*You’re certain? How do you know?*

She flashed him a faint smile. “A little bird told me.”

*Charity?*

“She showed up right after Harry left. I sent her to look after him.”

*The memories?*

“He saw them.”

Severus closed his eyes, sighing in relief before he opened them again. And then all he could do was look at Lily’s face, realizing what she must be feeling in that moment. Granted, he didn’t want the boy to die either, but Lily... frankly, he was surprised that she was still here.

*Are you all right?*

She hesitated, giving her head a little shake.

*Talk to me.*

“Severus, I... I can’t do this anymore.”

Only then did Severus realize how helpless he was. If she decided to leave, there’d be nothing he could do to stop her, no spell he could cast to keep her here beside him. He wouldn’t even be able to call out to her, his words trapped inside him just as his weakened body kept him imprisoned in this miserable shack.

*Another Strength Potion, if you will. Blood Replenisher, too.*

She frowned. “Isn’t it a little too soon?”

*Not for me.*

He waited for her to dose him before he used the coin again, encouraged by the tiny surge of energy that flooded through his body. No, perhaps he *couldn’t* walk out of this shack. But if he could just keep her talking...

*Now what were you saying?*

“That I can’t do this anymore.”

*Do what?*

“*This!*” she said, gesturing wildly at their surroundings. “I don’t want to be here!”

Well, he replied, doing his best to take his time with the message. *I can’t say it’s my favorite location either, though it does happen to be relatively safe. I doubt anyone will come here now that...*

“I don’t want to be *safe!* I’m so tired of hiding, sick of waiting and hoping for the best while everyone else is out there...”

*You can’t save him, Lily,* he responded when she trailed off. *Surely you must realize that.*

Expecting her to argue, he was surprised when she nodded.

“Of course I do, but that doesn’t mean...” She hesitated, using one of the clean cloths to wipe her eyes. “I need to be out there, Severus. No matter what happens with Harry, no matter how this all ends. I’ve got to fight.”

He stared at her, nonplussed. *And our child? You’d be putting more than just your own life at risk.*

“It’s for her sake that I need to be out there. Not just hers, but yours, Harry’s, everyone else I’ve ever loved. But most of all, I need to do it for myself. I need to...”

*Face your fear?*

Severus didn’t know where the words came from, but once they were out, he began to understand. In the end, it didn’t matter if Voldemort was defeated. Lily would be haunted for the rest of her life, forever left to wonder what would happen if another catastrophe landed on their doorstep. She’d have nothing to draw on other than her long years of hiding... just as

Severus would always be looking over his shoulder, waiting for someone like Dumbledore to tell him what to do.

She nodded. "I have to prove to myself that I can..."

*I know.*

And he *did* know. He knew what it was to remain in the shadows, stoic and silent, powerless to rise up in his own defense. Indeed, he'd never felt the weight of that silence more than he did now, realizing that he was nothing more than the Dark Lord's latest victim. Voldemort believed him dead... just as he must assume that Lily had been eliminated all those years ago. He thought he'd conquered them both, two lives snatched away with nothing more than a flick of his wand.

Of course, that wasn't true, but what did that matter? If Severus remained in the Shrieking Shack with Lily here beside him, Voldemort would go to his grave without ever knowing the truth. He'd never witness the ferocity of their defiance, would never believe that Severus had been anything other than his most faithful servant.

That, perhaps, was what rankled most. Severus might've spent the past two decades convincing Voldemort that he was loyal to his cause, but he hated him for believing it. Did Voldemort truly think that he could torture him for years, force him to do unspeakable things, even murder the woman he loved, without any fear of retribution? What kind of spineless coward would accept that sort of treatment without even attempting to fight back?

And then Severus knew. Voldemort *did* believe him to be a coward. It was why he'd chosen to place his trust in him, after all, convinced that he was too much of a cowering sycophant to ever betray him.

"Severus, you're shaking."

Lily was right, though this time, it had nothing to do with the state of his health. He felt a surge of adrenaline rush through his veins, trembling with years upon years of barely suppressed rage as he pressed his palms against the floor. Pushing with all the strength he had, he managed to elevate his upper body, closing his eyes against a wave of lightheadedness.

To Lily's credit, she didn't protest. He heard her gasp, followed by a swiftly muttered spell that slid a cabinet behind him. Sighing in gratitude, he slumped against it, fumbling for the coin he'd dropped.

But before he could send her a message, requesting another round of potions, it occurred to him that he might be strong enough to dose himself.

*Wand*, he said instead.

Frowning, she did as he asked, laying the slender length of wood in his outstretched hand. He attempted a nonverbal, pleased to hear the clinking of bottles as they slipped out of the sack. Levitating them in front of his face, he used a different spell to uncork the first vial, tipping it into his mouth.

Swallowing was bloody painful, but he was determined now, dosing himself with anything that might make the slightest bit of difference. Strength Potion, Blood Replenisher, a little

something for the pain, followed by one of his own concoctions, meant for extra speed and stamina. There were two vials of this one, the second of which he dropped in Lily's lap.

"Severus," she said, tucking the vial in her pocket as she pushed herself to her feet. "I don't want to leave you like this, but I... I can't stay. I have to be there, even if..."

"Wait," he croaked.

She shook her head, glancing down at her coin as she took a couple steps toward the tunnel. "Someone will be here soon to look after you. I'll make sure of it."

*No kiss goodbye?*

She hesitated, letting out a little sigh as she came to kneel beside him. There was no mistaking the relief in her expression, no doubt based on the assumption that he was willing to let her go without protest. He was content to let her believe that, at least for the moment, his eyes fluttering closed as she pressed her lips to his.

"I love you," she whispered. "You know that, right?"

*And I love you. Which is why...* Letting the coin fall from his hand, he gripped the front of her robes. "I'm... coming... with... you..."

Her eyes widened. "Severus, you can't!"

His throat was too raw for another response, feeling as if it had been ripped open all over again. He shrugged, deciding that there were better ways to make his intentions known.

Taking a deep breath, he eased himself off the ground, inch by painful inch. The room teetered dangerously, his legs buckling once, twice, and then a third time before he managed to hold himself upright. It was all he could do not to collapse, taking several shaky steps before he was close enough to brace himself against the wall.

"Have you gone mad?!"

"I..." He trailed off on a groan, his eyes flickering to the coin he'd left on the floor. Retrieving it, Lily pressed it into his hand.

*I'm coming with you.*

"Look at you!" she exclaimed. "You can hardly walk!"

To be fair, she had a point, though Severus was beginning to feel stronger. The potions were indeed working — his legs had almost stopped trembling, his body swaying only slightly as he pushed himself away from the wall.

"Damn it, Severus. Don't make me put you in a body bind."

*Harsh treatment for a wizard in my condition.*

Lily huffed, her fingers twitching toward her wand. "If it would keep you from hurting yourself worse, maybe even getting yourself killed..."

The spell was nonverbal, so swift that she never saw it coming. Black vines shot from the wall, coiling around her arms and legs. It was a mild spell, all things considered, one that

couldn't possibly do her any harm. But she still looked shocked, her wand slipping from her fingers as she struggled against her restraints.

Summoning her coin, he positioned it so she could read his message.

*I'm not as helpless as I seem. In fact... He paused, taking a second to steady himself. I don't intend on being helpless ever again. Not like this.*

He had neither the time or energy to explain further, but she seemed to understand his meaning. Her eyes swept across their dismal hiding place, lingering on the bloodstains on the floor before she lifted them to meet his. He saw no anger there, no trace of resentment for what he'd done. Instead, those eyes were a mirror into his own soul, filled with a desperate need to make a stand before it was too late.

"Release me," she said quietly. "Now."

He hesitated, his eyes dropping to the curve of her stomach. To lose either one, let alone the loss of them both... it didn't bear thinking. But he couldn't stand the thought of leaving her here either, snatching away what little power she had over her own destiny. Like him, she'd been waiting for this moment all her life... who was he to stand in her way?

*I'll not try to stop you, he etched across the surface of the coin. If you will not attempt to stop me. Agreed?*

"Agreed."

With a flick of his wand, he released her, trying not to stagger as she wrapped an arm around his waist. He managed a few shuffling steps, only to stop in his tracks when he realized they were headed toward the tunnel.

*No time.*

"No, I guess not. But how..."

*Apparition.*

"Severus, you're not strong enough."

*We're not on Hogwarts grounds, he pointed out. There's nothing stopping you from...*

"Oh, right."

*Front gate. Can you manage it?*

"I... I think so."

Turning to face him, she wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head against his chest as he slumped against her. One slow, dizzying circle and the Shrieking Shack melted away, replaced by a sickening blur of colors. Despite their smooth landing, Severus fell to his knees, fighting to keep the bile down.

"Severus!"

He held up a hand, closing his eyes as he inhaled through his nose. To vomit now would be disastrous, the worst sort of torture that could possibly be inflicted on his injured throat. Not only that, but if he tore his wound open...

He lost his train of thought as Lily laid a hand on his head, her fingers gently stroking his hair.

"Breathe, Severus," she whispered. "Just breathe."

In... out... in... out...

Gradually, his nausea faded, his eyes snapping open as he heard shouts in the distance.

"Ready?"

Inclining his head a fraction, he summoned the strength to heave himself to his feet.

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It was the longest walk Harry had ever taken, the world utterly silent as he entered the Forbidden Forest. Finding it hard to believe he'd once been scared of this place, he ignored any thought of looming trees and creatures unknown. The only thing that frightened him now was death itself, making him wonder if he had the strength to face it.

*"You assume he won't go through with it if he knows his fate in advance. I disagree."*

Harry jumped as Snape's voice echoed through his mind, so loud and clear that he couldn't help glancing over his shoulder. There was no one there, of course, just the whispering of wind as it rustled through the trees.

*"The boy has his share of flaws, but a lack of courage isn't one of them."*

Had Snape really believed in him that much? More than Dumbledore, it seemed, which was a hard truth to swallow. After all, it was Dumbledore who'd set him on this path, choosing to lay the fate of the Wizarding world on his shoulders. He'd asked so much of him, all while refusing to trust him in return. Why? Had he expected him to run away like some coward? Thought he wouldn't do what needed to be done if he'd known what to expect?

But then it was Dumbledore's voice Harry heard in his head, though this time, the words weren't plucked from memory. It was something deeper than that, a part of him that knew exactly how Dumbledore would respond.

*What purpose would that have served?*

Yes, he could've told Harry sooner, but would the truth had given him any comfort? Would it have changed the outcome? He might've had a little more time to say goodbye, perhaps, but that was all.

Speaking of unanswered questions... Harry reached for the pouch at his neck, withdrawing the Snitch.

*I open at the close.*

He'd puzzled over that riddle for months, almost glad to have the one last, crucial bit of information that helped him solve it.

"I am about to die," he whispered.

He wasn't surprised when the Snitch cracked open to reveal the Resurrection Stone. What else could it have been?

More importantly, who was it that he needed to see?

But the answer to that question was obvious, too. He closed his eyes, turning the stone once, twice, and then a third time before he opened them again.

"Dad..."

Except for the eyes, the resemblance was uncanny. James Potter could've been Harry's twin, barely older than his son on the night he'd died. His expression was peaceful, his lips curving into a gentle smile as he approached.

"Dad, I'm so sorry for what happened to you."

The specter shook his head. "I did not give my life in vain. Neither will you."

There were a hundred questions Harry could've asked him in that moment. Did he know what had happened to Lily, that she was alive? Did he know she'd ended up with Snape?

But then he realized that it didn't matter. This James belonged to a different world, freed from all earthly concerns. He was only here because Harry had requested his presence, not due to any attachment over what once had been. He was without anger, without judgment, free from worry or disappointment. Harry gazed at his serene features, wondering if death might not be so bad after all.

"You are nearly there," James said, his voice as soft as a summer breeze. "Very close. We are... so proud of you."

Harry turned to Sirius, grateful to have one last look at his godfather. Sirius was more handsome than he'd ever seen him, the way he might've looked if those long years in Azkaban hadn't aged him before his time. There were questions Harry would've liked to ask him, too, but deep down, he already knew the answers. Whatever grudges Sirius had held, the secrets he'd kept... he'd acted with the best of intentions, his love so deep that it had bordered on irrational.

"Does it hurt?"

"Dying?" Sirius shook his head. "Not at all. Quicker and easier than falling asleep."

It was only when the third man cleared his throat that Harry's sadness returned, tears springing to his eyes as he turned to look at Remus. Like the others, death had improved his appearance, removing the lines in his face. But unlike them, he'd had little time to adjust to his fate. There was still a hint of sorrow in his eyes, twinges of regret in the words he spoke.

"And he will want it to be quick. He wants it over."

"I didn't want you to die," Harry said, his eyes sweeping over the three of them. "Any of you. I'm sorry... right after you'd had your son... Remus, I'm sorry."

"I am sorry, too. Sorry I will never know him. But he will know why I died and I hope he'll understand. I was trying to make a world in which he could live a happier life."



Harry nodded, knowing there was nothing else to be said. It was time now... time to muster up his courage and do what needed to be done.

“You’ll stay with me?”

“Until the very end,” James replied.

“They won’t be able to see you?”

“We are part of you,” said Sirius. “Invisible to anyone else.”

Yes, they were all a part of him. Not just his father and the Marauders, but the mother who loved him, the friends he’d left behind. Dumbledore, the other professors... even Snape, as strange as it still seemed. He wouldn’t be who he was without them, a boy who truly understood the meaning of sacrifice.

In that way, at least, Harry supposed he was lucky. He might have to give up his life, but at least he had something worth dying for.

## 86. The Final Reckoning

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### Chapter 86: The Final Reckoning

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“Severus, wait.”

To say he looked terrible would’ve been an understatement. His face was deathly pale, his mouth twisted in a grimace. But there was no mistaking the determination in his eyes, nor the stubborn set of his jaw. He would face Voldemort or die in the attempt — there was no other option.

*We’re running out of time.*

“I know,” Lily said as she glanced at her coin. “I just want to make sure you’re all right.”

*I’m fine.*

“Please? It’ll only take a minute.”

*Very well,* he replied, his eyes fixed on the castle in the distance. *Make it quick.*

Letting him lean against a tree, she checked his wound, relieved that there were no signs of bleeding. He even seemed to be healing by slow degrees, the puncture marks slightly less swollen than they’d been in the Shrieking Shack. But she couldn’t ignore his sickly pallor, nor the low hiss that emerged from his throat as she replaced the bandage. He was obviously in a great deal of pain, though of course, he offered no complaint.

“Sorry,” she said quietly, reaching up to wipe the sweat from his forehead. “I know it hurts.”

*It isn’t so bad.*

Even as he said it, he slumped more heavily against the tree, his muscles quivering with exertion. He’d already pushed himself beyond his limits, the strength of his mind at odds with a body that was severely weakened by trauma and blood loss. Really, it was no wonder he was in such a hurry. He only had so much to give, after all, keenly aware that he was on the brink of collapse.

“More potions?”

*I thought we’d run out.*

Shaking her head, she reached in her pocket. “I still have a few.”

Severus didn’t even attempt to hide his relief, his eyes fluttering closed as she brought a vial to his lips. She dosed him with Blood Replenisher, followed by the stamina potion he’d given her in the Shrieking Shack. Other than that, she gave him the last two vials of pain reliever, hoping like hell it would be enough to make a difference.

Only then did she remember the Polyjuice, withdrawing the vials from her other pocket. She held them up for his inspection, the liquid shimmering softly as she ignited the tip of her wand.

He frowned. *Do you wish to...*

"No," she said. "Do you?"

*Certainly not.*

She cast a Disillusionment charm over them instead, realizing it was the best possible option under the circumstances. Revealing either of their identities too soon would be tantamount to suicide, especially when one of them was already injured.

"Ready?"

Yes.

They resumed their slow progress, skirting the perimeter of the Forbidden Forest. She could no longer see Severus, but she could feel him, relieved that his shaking had dissipated somewhat. He wasn't leaning on her so heavily — even his breathing seemed deeper and more even.

Of course, it was only an illusion, the potions lending him a strength that went far beyond his own capabilities. At best, it was a temporary solution, one that was likely to wear off sooner rather than later. Would it give him enough time to do what he needed to do? She hoped so, refusing to even consider the alternative.

*Do you see them?*

"Yes," she murmured, her eyes fixed on the crowd that had just emerged from the Forbidden Forest. They were still too far away for her to make out any faces, but Hagrid's hulking form was impossible to miss. He was carrying something in his arms... something that looked like...

"Harry Potter is dead."

For a second, Lily thought she might faint. Her world grew dark around the edges, and then it was Severus who was holding *her* up, his arm tight around her waist. She felt the tension in his body, followed by a whisper of noise as he withdrew his wand.

Despite what he'd said, she knew he wouldn't hesitate to stop her from doing something foolish. But of course, he couldn't have realized that she had every reason to restrain herself. What Dumbledore had told her...

"He was killed as he ran away," Voldemort continued, "trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him."

"Bull... shit..." Severus said, his voice emerging as a feeble croak.

"The battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death Eaters outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is finished."

"Severus," she hissed as she felt him start to tremble. "Severus, it's all right. It isn't what it seems!"

"Anyone who continues to resist," the high, clear voice interrupted, "man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family."

"It's all right," she repeated more urgently. "Harry's not..."

But what if she was wrong? What if Dumbledore had made it all up, willing to do whatever it took to keep her from interfering? True, he had *seemed* sincere, but...

"Come out of the castle now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared."

They were getting closer now, close enough for her to get a good look at the body in Hagrid's arms. Harry's face was as pale as a freshly bleached sheet, his arms and legs dangling limply as the half giant unleashed a wretched sob. With that, she lost her composure, her breath catching in her throat as her shoulders began to shake. Severus attempted to stop, but she forced them both to keep walking, tears blurring her vision as they approached the castle.

*Lily. Lily, listen to me.*

She'd almost forgotten the coin, blinking furiously as she stared down at her open palm. Severus's words were frantic, lines of script melting away so quickly that she barely had a chance to read them.

*You were right, Lily. It isn't what it seems. He hasn't won. Not yet. There's only one Horcrux left, yes? If we can dispose of it, he'll be as mortal as any other creature.*

"But Harry... he can't be... I thought..."

*I know, Severus responded as she trailed off. I am... deeply sorry that we could not save him. Truly, I am. But Lily, there are other lives at stake. Yours. Mine. Our child's, along with thousands of other innocents. Your son was willing to give up his life so that the rest of us might have a better future. Do we want that sacrifice to be in vain?*

"No, but..."

*Do we allow Voldemort to get away with the atrocities he's inflicted, or do we make him pay for what he's done?*

Surprised, she glanced up at Severus, wishing she could see his face. It was the first time he'd ever referred to Voldemort as anything other than the Dark Lord, making it clear that he'd freed himself from even the facade of loyal Death Eater. She didn't know why, but it was that single word that restored her faith, giving her the strength she needed to carry on.

"You already know the answer to that," she said quietly. "Let's go."

It wasn't easy to maintain control over her emotions, especially when Harry's allies spotted his body. Dozens of cries filled the air, pitiful wails and shouts of denial. She was almost grateful when Voldemort silenced them, struggling to get her bearings as she braced herself for whatever might happen next.

"He was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds. Killed while trying to save himself..."

*Liar. That boy was no coward.*

"I know," she whispered, glancing down at the coin before she focused on Harry again. He couldn't be dead... could he? So pale... so still... she could feel the hope draining out of her like an overturned cauldron, desperate to memorize every inch of his face even as she willed him to open his eyes.

That attention to detail allowed her to see what no one else did. There was the tiniest flutter of eyelashes, followed by a slight twitch of his mouth. She sucked in a sharp breath, her voice pitched low as she tightened her arm around Severus's waist.

"He's alive! Oh god, he's alive."

*Lily...*

She jerked her head up, unable to suppress a gasp as Neville attempted to rush at Voldemort. In a flash, he was disarmed, left utterly defenseless as he struggled to his feet. Nonetheless, he didn't cower, meeting his enemy stare for stare.

"We need your kind, Neville Longbottom."

"I'll join you when hell freezes over!"

*Clearly*, Severus said, prompting Lily to look at the coin again. *I underestimated that boy.*

"It would seem so," she whispered, though she might as well have shouted the words. No one could've heard them in the midst of all the commotion, not a single soul detecting their presence as they crept around the Death Eaters and joined the other side.

After that, the situation escalated so quickly that she could hardly follow what was happening. There was a tumult of screaming giants, followed by a herd of centaurs stampeding toward the castle. Severus managed to guide her inside, both of them turning on their heel just as Neville swung the sword, managing to decapitate Nagini with a single stroke.

*Shame. I would've loved to have done that myself.*

Lily opened her mouth to respond, though the words never came. She'd caught sight of Harry again, gasping as she watched him pull the Invisibility Cloak over himself.

"Severus, look! Harry's..."

The noise around them was deafening, but she could still hear Severus as he let out a heavy sigh. He tightened his hold on her, his breath coming faster as he took a step backward.

*In here.*

She hadn't noticed the tiny alcove, disguised by an overly large tapestry. It wasn't much, especially with curses flying in every direction, but *any* protection was better than none.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, she removed the Disillusionment charm, her eyes sweeping over Severus from head to toe. His face was stark white, body visibly shaking, mouth set in a grim line. But his eyes were clear, his wand arm surprisingly steady as he peered through a gap in the tapestry.

"*Sec... tum... semp... ra!*"

She didn't expect the spell to work, her eyes widening as the werewolf landed facedown in a puddle of blood. Giving her a smug look, Severus turned his focus to his next target, catapulting the Death Eater into the air with a powerful nonverbal.

With that, he released his hold on her waist, using the wall to support himself as he struck out at a third opponent. Shrugging, she Disillusioned him again, moving to the other side of the tapestry so she could find a target of her own. She'd felled more than a dozen before the battle died down somewhat, everyone's attention focused on two individual duels.

First was Molly Weasley, facing off with Bellatrix Lestrange. It seemed that Bellatrix had attempted to curse Ginny, which Molly had taken rather personally. Her carrot colored hair formed a wild halo around her head, her eyes flashing as she lifted her wand.

Hers wasn't the only curse that hit Bellatrix. The other slammed into her at the exact same moment, a jet of green light emanating from some unknown location. Lily knew who had cast it, of course... there was no mistaking the huff of satisfaction from the other side of the alcove.

As for the second duel... Voldemort's wrath was terrible, a shrill scream echoing off the walls as he saw Bellatrix fall. Minerva and his other opponents were blasted backward, but before they could make impact, a familiar voice rose above the din.

*"Protego!"*

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Severus stared at the boy in disbelief, struggling to wrap his mind around what was happening. Oh, he'd heard what Lily had said, had even seen the empty spot where the body had lain. But he hadn't believed, even for a second, that the boy could've survived. How was that possible? Had Dumbledore known it would come to this? If so, then why...

"He'll be all right now," Lily said softly. "We all will."

He barely noticed when she lifted the Disillusionment charm, though he knew why she'd done it. There was no mistaking the power of that shield, rendering them both immune to attacks from the other side.

"You won't be killing anyone else tonight," Harry said. "You won't be able to kill any of them ever again. Don't you get it? I was ready to die to stop you from hurting these people..."

Severus winced as his throat tightened, blinking away the sudden moisture in his eyes. Of course, it only made sense that Lily was shielded, along with Granger and Weasley and everyone else the boy had ever cared for. But the fact that the protection extended to *him*? That wouldn't have been possible if Harry had doubted, even for a second, that Severus was on his side.

"But you did not!" Voldemort snapped.

"I meant to, and that's what did it. I've done what my mother did."

Glancing at Lily, Severus saw that her eyes had filled with tears. Harry was right, of course, though Voldemort couldn't have known just how deep the similarities were. Neither

of them had died as a result of their sacrifice, and yet...

He lost his train of thought as Lily came to stand beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. Pushing on the tapestry, he widened the gap, allowing them both to watch the confrontation.

*"Love, which did not prevent me stamping out your Mudblood mother like a cockroach, Potter — and nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse."*

Severus tensed, even as he felt Lily do the same. He could practically read her mind, knowing how badly she must've wanted to storm out of their hiding place and prove Voldemort wrong. He would've loved to do the same, truth be told, but this wasn't the time. Not yet.

Checking to make sure she was still holding her coin, he sent her a message.

*Clean me up.*

*"What?"* She frowned.

*Make me look a little better.*

With that, she understood, her expression thoughtful as she examined his appearance. He couldn't see what she was doing, at least not at first, though the spells were easy enough to recognize. One would lend a little color to his face, while the next managed to freshen his filthy clothing. The last one cleansed his hair quite thoroughly, removing the blood, the grease and dried perspiration, transforming it into a smooth curtain that brushed his shoulders.

*Thank you.*

She nodded, conjuring a mirror to check her own hair. Of course, she didn't need any improvements — from her neat braid to the flattering robes she must've transfigured while he'd been unconscious, she'd never looked more beautiful.

*"Now?"* she asked, giving him a hopeful look.

*Not yet.*

Severus watched the confrontation unfold, the crowd growing silent as Voldemort taunted Harry. Or *attempted* to taunt him, at any rate. The boy had never been more calm, his voice not wavering in the slightest as he responded to each challenge.

*"I brought about the death of Albus Dumbledore!"*

*"You thought you did,"* Harry said. *"But you were wrong."*

Severus took a deep breath, his body quivering with anticipation.

*"Dumbledore is dead!"*

*"Yes, Dumbledore's dead,"* Harry agreed, *"but you didn't have him killed. He chose his own manner of dying, chose it months before he died, arranged the whole thing with the man you thought was your servant."*

*"What childish dream is this?"* Voldemort demanded, as Severus's lips twitched into a smile.

“Severus Snape wasn’t yours. Snape was Dumbledore’s, Dumbledore’s from the moment you started hunting down my mother. And you never realized it, because of the thing you can’t understand. You never saw Snape cast a Patronus, did you?”

Of course, Harry wasn’t trying to give him an opening. For all he knew, Severus was still in the Shrieking Shack, incapacitated or perhaps even dead. But Severus couldn’t imagine a more perfect opportunity, waving his wand in a smooth, graceful motion.

*“Ex... pecto Patron... um.”*

The doe burst from the tip, eliciting a collective gasp as it bounded toward Harry. For a second, the boy looked as shocked as everyone else, though that was quickly replaced by understanding. He reached out to the silvery creature, smiling ever so slightly as it nuzzled his hand.

“Snape’s Patronus was a doe,” he said, “the same as my mother’s. He’s loved her for nearly all of his life, from the time they were children. You should’ve realized...”

“L... Lily,” Severus rasped, ignoring the pain in his throat. “Now.”

But she didn’t need any prompting. Her wand was already twirling through the air, sending a second doe to join the first. Harry’s smile grew wider, even as those around him muttered in disbelief.

“A foolish trick,” Voldemort said, his voice dripping with contempt. “As if I didn’t watch both of them die, as if I wasn’t certain that...”

“Certain?” Harry echoed. “Are you really?”

“Your wretched mother went to her grave nearly 20 years ago. As for Snape...” Voldemort sneered. “His body lies on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I left it there three hours ago.”

“Dead?”

“Of course! What kind of foolishness...”

Severus stepped out from behind the tapestry, deeply satisfied as Voldemort’s eyes widened in shock. Taking a deep breath, he leaned against the wall for a few seconds, attempting to summon a little more strength.

“No!” Harry shouted as several Order members lifted their wands. “He is not to be harmed.”

With the slightest nod, Severus strode forward, determined not to show any sign of weakness as he made his way across the room. Fortunately, appearances were deceiving, no doubt helped by his billowing black robes. As long as he didn’t speak...

“How,” Voldemort said, red eyes narrowing as he looked him up and down, “is this possible?”

“Potions Master,” Harry said, earning himself a grateful look. “Though that was only part of what saved him. He would’ve never survived without the one thing my mother gave me, which was given to him as well.”



"Love?" Voldemort spat the word like a curse. "Severus is nothing, just a tool to be used and discarded. Dumbledore knew that, even as I do. What kind of a fool could possibly *love* such a..."

"Me."

Dozens of people cried out as Lily entered the room, though Severus never noticed who they were. There was no one but Lily, her head held high as she came to stand beside him. Sliding an arm around his waist, she flashed him a small smile before she turned her attention to Voldemort.

"I killed you."

"Yes," she agreed, "but you saved me, too. Why?"

Severus expected Voldemort to look shocked, even horrified. Instead, his expression was speculative, his eyes glowing with interest as he circled around them.

"So..." he said slowly. "It *did* work."

"Why?" she repeated.

"An experiment. Nothing more."

"Why her?" Harry said. "Why my mother?"

"Because I had a reason to spare her life."

"Snape?"

"Until he tired of her, yes." Voldemort ran his fingers along the length of his wand. "Though I was rather hoping he might get her with child before that happened. It would've given me the opportunity to teach him a valuable lesson."

Harry opened his mouth, no doubt to ask him what he meant. It was Severus who stopped him, giving his head a little shake.

"Regardless of what you were planning," Lily said, "it was love that saved me."

Voldemort shook his head. "A matter of chance. Nothing more."

"Love," she repeated, looking him straight in the eye. "You would've never used that spell if Severus hadn't begged you to spare me. Don't you see? His love for me was strong, so powerful that even you weren't immune..."

"*Enough!*" he screamed. "Severus has no power over me! Not then, and certainly not now! It is I who disarmed him in the Shrieking Shack, I who rendered him defenseless. The Elder Wand answers to *me* now, which means..."

"No," said Harry. "It doesn't."

"Which *means* that after I have killed you, Harry Potter, eliminating whatever protection you have summoned, I will destroy them both. Severus, worthless traitor that he is, followed by your despicable mother."

"You won't."

“Come to think of it, I’ll kill your mother first so he can watch. I’ll cut her open bit by bit, remove the wretched spawn from inside her and smash it on the ground. It belongs to him, no doubt... I’ll make sure they’re both alive to watch it die.”

Severus felt himself shaking, exhaustion mingled with rage as he glanced at Harry. He hadn’t known... that much was obvious, his mouth dropping open as he stared at his mother’s stomach. Nonetheless, he recovered quickly, his green eyes lifting to meet Severus’s black ones.

He didn’t speak. There was no need to. A flicker of understanding passed between them, followed by a nod of approval as Severus lifted his wand.

“*Crucio*,” Severus said softly, and for the first time since he’d been injured, there was no sign of weakness in his voice. Voldemort dropped to his knees, unleashing a terrible scream.

“Mum?”

There was no mistaking Harry’s offer, though Lily shook her head. She kept her wand at her side, flashing her son a gentle smile.

“I already gave him you. I suppose that’s punishment enough.”

Severus allowed himself the satisfaction of one last scream before he ended the spell, his nerves thrumming with satisfaction as he lowered his wand.

“You like to teach lessons,” Harry said, “but you don’t seem capable of learning them. How many more lives do you have to threaten before you realize...”

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

The jet of green light, directed at Severus, bounced harmlessly off the wall.

“Before you realize,” Harry repeated, “that love is the one thing you cannot conquer?”

“The Elder Wand,” Voldemort said with a sneer, “will conquer you all.”

“I see,” Harry said, his tone almost pleasant. “And who controls the Elder Wand?”

“Me! I defeated its former master, did I not?”

“Well, that all depends.”

Voldemort shook his head. “I defeated them both! Dumbledore rots in his tomb, while Severus was left lying in a pool of blood. Neither had the power to stop me, neither...”

“Dumbledore was *never* defeated. It was his own wish that Snape should kill him, which did nothing to change the wand’s ownership.”

Severus closed his eyes, trying to stop his legs from trembling. He’d ignored it for as long as possible, but there was no denying that the potions were wearing off. He felt weaker by the second, pain gnawing at him with a vengeance as he leaned more heavily on Lily.

“Even better,” Voldemort said, his eyes glittering with satisfaction. “That means the wand was mine from the moment I stole it from his tomb. Oh yes, Potter... I saw his body. Such a shriveled, shrunken thing. Pathetic, really.”

“The only thing that’s *pathetic*,” Harry responded, “is your delusions. The wand chooses the wizard, not the other way around. That one chose a new master before Dumbledore died. Its allegiance belongs to the one who disarmed him... it belongs to Draco Malfoy.”

Severus opened his eyes, immediately regretting the action. The room swayed before him, his knees threatening to buckle at any second. To make matters worse, he felt a distinct wetness on the side of his neck, trickling down into his collar.

“Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. We duel on skill alone, then after I have killed you, I will attend to Draco Malfoy...”

“It’s too late.” Harry’s voice echoed strangely, as if he were speaking from the other end of a long tunnel. “I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took this wand...”

“Severus?” Lily whispered, though he didn’t have the strength to reassure her. All he could do was force his eyes to remain open, knowing that his moment had finally come. He’d waited too long to see Lord Voldemort fall. He’d be damned if it was going to be the other way around.

*Just a little longer... bloody hell, just a little longer...*

Severus watched as Harry lifted his wand, even as a soft golden glow crept in through the windows. Streaks of orange illuminated the enchanted sky above their heads, lending him some tiny measure of strength. He focused on Voldemort then, red eyes connecting with black ones for an infinitesimal moment.

Unable to help himself, Severus smiled.

He never heard the spells that were cast, his ears filling with a dull, persistent roar. But he saw Voldemort topple backward, his features fixed in a permanent expression of shock. Those eyes... those terrible, hideous eyes... they were blank now, forever frozen in death.

With that, Severus let his own eyes drift closed, never feeling the impact as his body hit the floor.

## 87. A Time for Healing

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### Chapter 87: A Time for Healing

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Severus grunted as he came back to consciousness, expecting to find a hard floor beneath him. Instead, the surface was reasonably soft, his head resting on a stack of pillows. Slowly, he opened his eyes, surprised to find himself in the Hospital Wing.

“Severus?”

He turned his head by slow degrees, spotting Lily there beside him. Her hair had come loose from its braid, tangled wisps framing a face that was pale with fatigue.

“Hi,” she said, and even her voice sounded tired. “How are you feeling?”

“Like... hell...”

Shaking her head, she pressed the coin into his palm. “Use this.”

*What time is it?*

“Just after eight.”

*I’ve been unconscious for...*

“About 12 hours.”

*I see.* He hesitated, realizing there was no need to ask how long she’d been sitting there. *Have you slept?*

“No.”

*Eaten?*

“A little.”

*Has anyone else seen to your well-being?*

She shrugged. “I’m not the one who’s injured.”

*Perhaps not, but...*

Before he could finish, a familiar figure came bustling into his line of vision. Poppy seemed pleased to find him awake, humming quietly as she set a tray of supplies on the edge of the bed.

“Let me just change your dressing, then I’ll give you another round of potions.”

Another round? He glanced at the bedside table, noticing an impressive collection of empty vials. She’d been treating him all day, it seemed, though he had no memory of it.

Blood Replenisher, healing draughts, three variations of Nutrient Potion, not to mention one of the strongest pain remedies...

He stiffened, trying not to wince as she peeled the bandage off his neck. She massaged his wound with dittany cream, her fingers surprisingly gentle as she bound it with fresh linen.

"You're to stay in bed until further notice," she said sternly. "No talking either."

"Wait..."

"What did I *just* tell you?"

"Here," Lily said, handing Poppy her coin. "He can talk through this."

It was exactly what Severus had been hoping for. He felt his lips twitch, carefully composing his message.

*I'll do as you ask... if you'll take a moment to see about Lily. Food. Rest. A cursory exam, if you will.*

"Of course."

The next thing he knew, she'd summoned a cot, positioning it a few feet from his bed as she instructed Lily to lie down.

"What? No, I'm fine. He's the one who needs..."

"Hush," Poppy interrupted. "The Headmaster is right. You had a trying night, to say the least, and in your condition..."

*Headmaster?* Severus frowned, unable to believe that he still held the position. Of course, the fact that he was still *alive* was a miracle, one he hadn't even begun to process. He'd been entirely focused on the battle, determined to survive long enough to see Voldemort fall. Anything beyond that...

"Open your robe, if you will."

Sighing, Lily did as she was told, parting it to expose her stomach. Poppy examined her with expert hands, casting a couple of diagnostics before she nodded in satisfaction.

"This baby of yours couldn't be healthier," she said. "I'll fetch you both some food."

Severus barely heard her, stunned as his eyes swept over Lily's body. He felt like he was seeing it for the first time, finally able to contemplate her pregnancy without a sharp edge of regret. He knew now that he'd be with her throughout the rest of it, there beside her when she gave birth to their child. Their *daughter*, to be more specific, which he hadn't allowed himself to...

"Severus? Are you all right?"

He grunted, lifting his eyes to meet Lily's. Hers were as green as a summer forest, her hair like burnished copper beneath the torchlight. Would their daughter inherit those traits? He hoped so, though in the end, he supposed it didn't matter. It was enough to know that he'd be around to find out for himself.

"I..."

Lily shook her head. "Use the coin."

*I was just thinking...*

"About what?"

*Names.*

Of course, it was much more than that, though he didn't know how to explain it. He'd suppressed so much throughout her pregnancy, shying away from any question that might cause him further pain. To be hit with those questions all at once...

"Any ideas?"

*No.*

"Well, no need to rush. We've still got three months."

In the end, however, there was only one question that truly mattered. What kind of father would he be? Three months, and he'd done nothing to prepare himself for that role, assuming he'd be dead long before his child arrived. But now...

"It isn't much," Poppy said, interrupting his thoughts as she set a tray of sandwiches in Lily's lap. "But you're to eat at least two of them, all right?"

Severus closed his eyes, feeling faint as the aroma of roast beef reached his nostrils. As appetizing as it smelled, however, he knew it would be quite some time before he could hope to enjoy solid food again. Just the thought of attempting to choke down a sandwich made him groan aloud, his throat aching in protest.

That, he quickly realized, was a mistake. Poppy turned her attention to him, her eyes narrowing as she studied his expression.

"Looks like you need another dose of this," she said, pulling a vial from her apron pocket.

He shook his head, though that was another mistake. Unable to help himself, he hissed, reaching up to cover the bandage on his neck.

"No touching," she said, moving his hand back to his side. She pressed the vial to his lips, watching him like some fearsome bird of prey until he'd swallowed every drop. Almost immediately, the pain began to dissipate, though there was no ignoring the drowsiness that followed. He sighed, wishing he'd been allowed a few more minutes of consciousness. He'd hardly even begun to figure out...

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When Severus woke again, it appeared to be well after midnight, soft moonlight shining through the window. Lily had fallen asleep, curled up on her side beneath a tartan blanket.

"Sir?"

Gingerly, he turned his head, watching as Harry lifted his wand to cast a quick Muffliato.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No," he croaked, before he realized he was still holding his coin. To his surprise, Harry already had the other, gazing down at its shiny surface.

"She said this would be easier for you."

*You spoke to your mother?*

"For a few minutes, yeah. I wanted to stay longer, but she seemed really tired."

She wasn't the only one, Severus thought as he studied Harry's drawn features. He was tempted to send him straight up to Gryffindor tower, though of course, he had no right to do so. His days of ordering the boy around were over, leaving him to wonder what would take their place. What should he say? Should he apologize, or...

A streak of light flew past the window, illuminating the room in a sickly shade of green. Severus flinched, snatching his wand from the bedside table.

"It's all right," Harry said, tucking his own wand back in his sleeve. "It's only fireworks. They've been shooting them off for hours."

*Celebrating?*

"Some of them, yeah. The others..."

He didn't need to finish. Severus had seen the bodies, recognizing many more faces than he would've preferred. Among others, he'd spotted Remus Lupin, surprised to feel a touch of genuine regret over the loss. He knew he should offer his condolences, but would Harry believe him? Or would it only serve to open old wounds, reminding him of past resentments?

Hesitating, he struggled to find the words he needed. Finally, he said, *Too many were lost. Far too many.*

Harry nodded. "I brought a casualty list if you want to see it."

*Thank you. I'll have a look at it later.*

"As for what you did for my mother... for me..."

*It doesn't matter.*

"It does," Harry said, "though I understand if you're not ready to talk about it. Don't think I am either, to be honest. All of this is just..."

*I know.*

"Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that you'll be all right here. I've been talking to everyone, and... well, it might take some time, but they'll come around. I'll make sure of it."

To his horror, Severus felt a lump in his throat. He hesitated, avoiding the boy's eyes as he struggled for composure.

*You don't have to... that is, I appreciate...*

Harry shrugged. "Well, if I've got to be a *celebrity*, I figure I might as well use it for something good." Setting the coin down, he chuckled as he got to his feet. "Tell my mum that I'll see her in the morning."

---

Lily shut herself in the Prefects' bathroom, deciding to clean up a bit before she headed to Gryffindor tower. She brushed her hair until it shone, leaving it to hang loose as she slipped into the robes she'd transfigured. The pale pink cotton flattered her complexion, helped by a glamour that added a touch of color to her cheeks.

Of course, it didn't matter what she looked like. Most of the survivors were still ragged and dirty, their faces drawn from lack of sleep. But she was nervous about her meeting with Harry, willing to do anything that might boost her confidence.

As soon as she stepped out into the hallway, she knew she'd made a mistake. Dodging reporters was one thing, but there was no avoiding Hagrid, sniffing into his oversized handkerchief as he hurried to reach her side.

"Lily Potter. I still can't believe yer alive. I thought..."

"That's all right, Hagrid. Everyone did."

"But I was there that night. With Sirius..."

"I know."

Eventually, she managed to get away, rounding a corner only to run into Molly Weasley.

"I still don't know what happened, but we're so glad you found a way to come back to us."

Molly's eyes were bright with curiosity, though Lily didn't have time to answer her questions. With a word of thanks, she managed to excuse herself, promising that they'd meet for tea in a couple days.

"Lily!"

This time, she didn't even wait to see who'd called her. She ducked into the nearest classroom, glad to discover that she still had access to the passages. Soon enough, she'd reached her destination, smiling as she whispered the password to the Fat Lady's portrait.

"The Boy Who Lived."

She ducked into the room, immediately spotting Harry and his friends. Smiling at Ron and Hermione, she took a minute to introduce herself properly before she settled herself on the couch.

"Well, mate," Ron said. "Best get going then."

"Right. See you guys later."

Only then did she realize that Harry was nervous, too, his hands trembling as he poured her a cup of tea. The table in front of them was filled with platters — sausages and eggs, a bowl of fresh fruit, along with a basket of muffins. She wasn't particularly hungry, but she was touched by the gesture, helping herself to an apple. Harry grabbed a muffin, though he didn't eat it, staring off into the distance as he slowly picked it apart.

"You're making a mess," she said gently.



“Oh.” He glanced down at his lap, his cheeks turning red as he brushed the crumbs away. “Sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I’m the one who should apologize.”

“For messing up my clothes?”

She smiled. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.” He hesitated, giving his head a little shake. “I might have some questions, but it’s not like I’m mad at you. I mean, you’re *alive*. That’s what really matters, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said, swallowing past a lump in her throat. “I suppose it is.”

“How’s Snape?”

“A bit better, though Madame Pomfrey wants him to stay in the Hospital Wing for at least a couple of weeks. He’s not happy about it, but it’s probably for the best. With all the commotion around here...”

“Yeah, I know.”

“How are you holding up?”

Harry sighed. “I’m okay, though I’m really sorry about the lives that were lost. I wish I could’ve done more to help them, especially Remus and Tonks.”

“You did enough, Harry. Far more than anyone else could’ve done. The Wizarding world owes you....”

“Please,” he interrupted, his expression pained. “That’s all I’ve been hearing, and I don’t think it’s going to stop anytime soon. I never wanted to be a hero, you know. Just... did what I had to do.”

“All right,” she said. “For what it’s worth though, I’m proud of you.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I’ve been proud of you all along. Everything you’ve done over the years, all the things I’ve seen...”

He shook his head. “I still can’t believe you were there.”

“I know.”

“What happened with Sirius?” he said abruptly. “He knew about you, going all the way back to my third year. How come he didn’t tell anyone else?”

“Because I asked him not to.”

“But you *did* want him to tell Snape.”

“Yes.”

“Why him and no one else? I mean, I guess you knew that he would help you, but why did it have to be him?”

“He was the only one I trusted.”

Harry frowned. "What about Remus?"

"Remus..." Lily hesitated, not missing the grief in his eyes. "He was a good man, but we were never that close."

"Dumbledore?"

She shook her head. "Absolutely not."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't trust him. I stopped trusting him on the night he left you on my sister's doorstep. I saw what your childhood was like, and... I'm sorry, Harry. I'm so sorry. If I'd had the power to stop it, I would have."

"The Blood Protection..."

"I didn't know about that back then, but even if I had, it wouldn't have mattered. Not when you were neglected, mistreated, made to feel unwanted. He didn't have to leave you there, Blood Protection or not. You could've stayed at Hogwarts, or..."

"I don't think he ever wanted to hurt me," Harry said quietly.

"No, but I still had to stand by and watch him do it. I hated him for that." She hesitated, sighing heavily. "And then when I saw the way he manipulated you and Severus..."

"Was it that bad?"

"It was, at least from my perspective. I didn't want him to know I was there, afraid he'd find some way to use me against one of you."

Harry frowned. "Dumbledore wouldn't have done that."

"He was doing it all along, in ways you don't even realize. He..." Abruptly, she stopped, struck by the innocence in Harry's eyes. Despite everything, there was a part of him that loved Dumbledore, that still thought of him as a hero. Did she really want to destroy that? What purpose would it serve?

"Mum?"

"I just... didn't like the way he pushed you into all of this."

"Yeah, but I would've wanted it either way. I'm sure that Snape would have, too."

"I know."

"All Dumbledore did was show us the way."

She nodded. "It was hard for me to see that, especially when I found out you were a Horcrux. The way he lied to Severus, making him think he was helping you survive the war..."

"But he *didn't* lie, did he?"

"No, I suppose he didn't. But I couldn't have known..."

"I get it. I was angry at him, too."

Sighing, she poured herself another cup of tea. She was *still* angry at Dumbledore, truth be told, remembering how Severus had nearly bled to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. He might've died without ever knowing the truth, convinced that all his efforts to protect Harry had been in vain. If she hadn't been there to give him that potion...

"So Sirius didn't want to tell Snape," Harry said, interrupting her thoughts. "I know they hated each other, but..."

"Honestly? I think there was more to it than that. Sirius never forgave himself for what happened in Godric's Hollow, especially when Wormtail gave him the slip. Spending all those years in Azkaban, only to have it happen a second time?"

"Yeah, that had to be hard."

"By then, he'd come to care for you so much. I think that was the real reason he didn't want to tell Severus, probably why he was okay with not telling anyone else. I think he wanted to bring me back himself. What better way to make up for all his failures?"

"I never saw him as a failure," Harry said, his voice unsteady. "He had nothing to prove to me."

"Deep down, I'm sure he knew that. But living with that much guilt... it's hard not to feel unworthy."

"Guess he wasn't the only one who felt that way."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, there's Snape. Look at how much he was willing to do to make things right."

"That's true."

"And what about you? You didn't want me to know about you unless you were human, right? That's what I heard you tell him in those memories."

She stared at him, surprised by his perceptiveness. "I wanted to be..."

"A real mother," he finished for her. "Didn't see how you could be much use to me as long as you were stuck as an animal."

She nodded.

"You were wrong."

"I know that now."

"You were wrong about something else, too. When you were afraid that I might hate you? I could never do that, I..." He trailed off on a sigh. "The Snape thing is weird. I'll admit that. But if he meant what he said in those memories, if he's really sorry about the way he treated me..."

"He is," she said hastily. "Give him a little time to recover, and I'm sure he'll tell you himself."

"Yeah, well, I guess I owe him an apology, too."

"No, you don't. Whatever happened between you in the past... you were a child. He would never expect..."

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I haven't always been fair to him either, and knowing what I know now... I'd like to at least try to work things out with him, okay? He's obviously been good to you, and if you're..." He shot a furtive glance at her stomach. "I mean, unless you've been seeing someone else on the sly..."

"Harry!"

"No, I didn't mean... bloody hell, I can't believe I just said that. I only meant..."

Lily couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so hard, struggling to compose herself as he stared at her in bewilderment. She knew he hadn't meant to insult her, only that he'd been desperate to find some loophole. He might be willing to give Severus the benefit of the doubt, but the thought of being *related* to him in the near future? Clearly, that was a bit much.

"It's all right," she told him once she'd managed to catch her breath. "I know that all of this is..."

"Absurd? No, that's not the right word. It's just... you and him... I can't see how..."

"You don't understand how I can love him. Is that it?"

"Well, I know how much he's done for you..."

She shook her head. "It isn't that. I've always loved him, even when I was too young to understand what that word meant."

Harry frowned. "Why?"

"I guess I've always seen him for who he truly is. No one has ever understood either of us as well as we understand each other, and... I don't know, Harry. It just..."

"Makes sense?"

She smiled. "Something like that."

"What about my father? Did you love him?"

"Of course I did."

"But not the way you love Snape."

"We never love any two people in the exact same way. It's not even a matter of better or worse, just *different*." She hesitated, taking a sip of tea. "James was who I needed at the time, and I'm certainly not sorry I married him. He was..."

"You were happy?" Harry interrupted.

"Yes, especially when you were born. You were the best thing that ever happened to either of us — don't ever doubt that."

He nodded, his eyes straying to her stomach again. "When are you..."

"August."

“And Snape’s okay with it? I mean, no offense, but he’s never seemed to like kids all that much.”

“True, but he’s never had one of his own. He might surprise you.”

“I hope so. Wouldn’t want to have to hex him for picking on my little brother or sister.”

“If he tries,” she said with a smile. “I’ll hex him myself.”

Harry smiled back, his expression peaceful as his eyes met hers. They still had a lot to talk about, of course, though Lily could feel herself relaxing, her fears replaced by a newfound sense of certainty.

They were going to be okay. She knew that now, wondering how she could’ve ever thought otherwise. True, Harry had matured over the past year, but he’d always had a forgiving heart, one that would rather choose love than hatred.

In time, perhaps he’d even learn to love Severus, though she wasn’t expecting that to happen anytime soon. It was enough that he was willing to try, filling her heart with hope as she thought back over the past couple of days. In that short amount of time, Harry had completely changed his perspective, defending his former nemesis and even attempting to save his life. As for what he’d said just a few minutes ago...

*“Knowing what I know now... I’d like to at least try to work things out with him, okay?”*

Forgiving heart, indeed.

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“I meant what I said earlier. I really am proud of you.”

He turned to face her, flashing her a beautiful smile. “You know, Mum... I’m proud of you, too.”

## 88. The Portrait's Final Words

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### Chapter 88: The Portrait's Final Words

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"More pudding?"

Severus grimaced, giving his head a little shake.

"How about some broth?"

"No," he said, "though I *will* take some of that sausage."

"Are you kidding? Poppy would kill us both."

"Yes, well..." He paused, taking a sip of water. "When we get home, I'll eat whatever I please."

Lily didn't bother to argue, stifling a groan as she rose from the table. She was well into her sixth month now, her belly much larger than it had been during the battle. Of course, that probably wasn't helped by the enormous lunch she'd eaten, though she chose not to think about that as she escorted Severus back to his bed.

"Is it really necessary for me to lie here all afternoon?" he said, his tone peevish. "I'm hardly an invalid."

On one hand, he had a point. He'd improved dramatically over the past three weeks, looking much like his old self except for the puckered scars on the side of his neck. He seemed reasonably strong, and even his color was better, though he hadn't been outside in nearly a month. Gone was the sickly pallor, along with the dark circles that had been there for years. He was still pale, but naturally so, his eyes bright and clear.

Despite that, he still tired easily. His body had been through a hellish ordeal, ravaged by toxic venom and the enormous amount of blood he'd lost. He hadn't helped matters by pushing himself so hard during the battle, the added trauma adding weeks to his recovery time.

"Of course you're not an invalid," she said gently. "But there's nothing wrong with taking naps in the afternoon. Lots of people do it, even when they're perfectly healthy."

"Lazy people," he shot back, though he didn't resist as she placed an extra pillow behind his head. She retrieved her cloak, wrapping it around her shoulders as she leaned over to kiss him goodbye.

"I'll be back in a few hours."

---

“Lily!” called a familiar voice as she stepped out into the hallway. “Harry says you’re leaving tomorrow.”

Turning on her heel, she saw Molly Weasley heading in her direction, her arms laden down with a pile of singed bedding.

“We are, yes. Severus is anxious to get home, though I’m not sure...”

She trailed off, sighing heavily as she spotted a pair of reporters. The media attention had been relentless, the majority of it centered on her and Harry. Both of them had given countless interviews over the past three weeks, detailing his triumph along with the miracle of her survival. Most of the reporters had been respectful, with the exception of Rita Skeeter, who’d had the audacity to ask her what it was like to be raped by Severus Snape.

“How did it happen? Did he use brute force or were you Imperiused?”

That had earned her a hard slap, though it hadn’t made any difference. The wretched woman had merely sauntered off, rubbing her cheek as she’d muttered about her next big project.

“This way,” Molly said, propelling Lily up the stairs toward Gryffindor tower. The common room had become a sanctuary for Harry and his friends, the one place where they could escape from all the chaos.

“Hey, Mum!”

Harry was seated near the fire, surrounded by Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna. They looked tired yet reasonably content, having spent most of the morning helping with the reconstruction efforts.

“Hi Mrs. Pot...”

“Please, call me Lily.”

“Lily,” Hermione repeated, her expression apologetic. “Would you like some lunch?”

“Thank you, but I’ve already eaten.”

Neville smiled, shifting to the other side of the couch to make room for her. “How’s the Headmaster doing?”

“Much better, Neville. Thanks for asking.”

Out of all Harry’s friends, Neville was her favorite, though she was fond of the others, too. She’d always liked Hermione, and of course, she’d enjoyed bonding with Ginny in the Room of Requirement. Ron was friendly enough, and Luna... well, she was a bit peculiar, but certainly not in a bad way.

“All right,” Molly announced, her expression stern. “Time to get back to work!”

There was a collective groan as five of them got to their feet. Only Harry remained seated, waiting patiently for his friends to leave.

“You just take your time, Harry dear.”

“Buggering hell. Why does *he* get to...”

*“Ronald Weasley!”* Molly exclaimed as she ushered the others outside. “What did I tell you about...”

And then the room was silent, Harry’s expression wistful as he gazed into the fire. It was a look Lily had noticed quite a few times over the past few days, though she’d decided not to mention it until now.

“You don’t want to leave,” she said quietly, “do you?”

“No, it’s just... I can’t believe it’s over. School, the hunt for the Horcruxes, all of it. Honestly, I’m not sure what to do with myself.”

She nodded, giving his hand a little squeeze. “You can come with us if you’d like. Or I could stay with you at Grimmauld Place until you’re feeling more settled.”

He frowned. “What about Snape?”

“I’m sure he’d understand.”

“Thanks, but I was thinking I might stay with Ron and Ginny, especially since Hermione will be there, too. It’s just that... I mean, after everything that’s happened...”

“You don’t have to explain.”

“You’re not upset?”

She shook her head, even as she swallowed her disappointment. “Harry, you’ll be 18 in a couple months. It’s only natural that you want to be with your friends.”

“I want to spend time with you, too,” he said hastily. “Really, I do. You can come to the Burrow whenever you like, and... well, I don’t know where you’ll be, but...”

“Spinner’s End.”

“That’s Snape’s house, right? The one where he grew up?”

“He showed you that?”

“I saw a little bit, yeah. Honestly, I’m surprised he’d still want to live there.”

Lily hesitated, not knowing what to say. Deep down, she knew why Severus had chosen to stay in Cokeworth, clinging to that shabby little house despite so many bad memories. There were good memories, too, which must’ve given him comfort after her supposed death. The need for that was gone, perhaps, but...

“It’s the only home he has,” she said. “Besides, moving is expensive.”

“I’ve got plenty of money.”

“Oh, no, Harry. Severus would never...”

“I’m not talking about him,” Harry said. “I meant for you. I know it’s my inheritance, but if you’re alive, then it’s not really mine.”

“That money was your father’s. He wanted you to have it, and I do, too.”

“But if it would help you buy a better home...”



She shook her head. "I wouldn't touch it."

"All right then." He sighed, not quite managing to hide his exasperation. "Anyway, it's just for the summer, right? I guess that isn't so bad."

'Well, I don't know if...'

"Ah, there you are!" Minerva said as she slipped into the room, her eyes falling on Lily. "May I see you in my office? Erm, the Headmaster's office, I mean."

"Of course. I'll be there in a minute."

Saying goodbye to Harry wasn't easy, despite their plans to meet up again soon. Lily would've preferred to keep him with her, even if that had meant living at Grimmauld Place for the summer while Severus remained at Spinner's End. Granted, it wouldn't have been easy, but Harry was her son. If he'd needed her...

But of course, he wasn't a child anymore. He didn't need her to take care of him. What he needed was time to adjust, a chance to get to know her on his own terms. Meanwhile, she'd soon have a second child to worry about, one who *would* require her constant attention. She had no idea where they'd be by the end of summer, whether Severus would want to return to Hogwarts or find something else to do. Perhaps what they *all* needed was a few months to get settled — everything else would work itself out in time.

Satisfied with this conclusion, she made her way up to the Headmaster's office, whispering the password to the newly restored gargoyle. She pushed the door open, her eyes straying to the tapestry on the opposite wall.

"Have a seat, dear. Would you like some tea?"

"That would be lovely."

Minerva poured them both a cup, tapping the desk to summon a plate of biscuits before she settled back in her chair. "So you're leaving tomorrow?"

Lily nodded. "I wish we could stay longer, but with my due date less than three months away..."

"Yes, I'm sure you have quite a few preparations to make."

"I'll need to pack up our things," she said, pausing to take a sip of tea. "There's stuff in our quarters, and I believe Severus left a few things in his desk."

"What are you planning to do about Charity?"

'Honestly? I have no idea. We haven't had a chance to talk about it.'

"Why don't you leave her here with me? I'm sure I can restore her."

"Really?"

"I don't see why not." Minerva shrugged. "I've already had a look at the instructions, and I don't think it'll be too difficult."

Lily frowned. "Severus left them for you? He never mentioned..."

“Oh, he made sure I’d get them,” Minerva said with a chuckle. “Went a bit overboard, if you ask me.”

“How so?”

“I received a Howler right after the battle. The blasted thing wouldn’t stop shouting until I came up here and found his hiding place. He’d stashed all sorts of things in there, from instructions on removing the charm to his last will and testament. Of course, all his personal papers are still sealed — he used some spell that was designed to break upon his death.”

Lily nodded, unable to suppress a shudder as she pictured Severus in the Shrieking Shack. That first glimpse of him, lying pale and still in a pool of blood... it had haunted her for weeks, her sleep plagued by nightmares more often than not.

“Are you feeling unwell?”

“No, not at all.” Pushing the thought away, she managed a smile. “Are you sure you don’t mind looking after Charity?”

“Of course not. I’ll need blood from a relative, but her family should be out of hiding soon. I’m sure they’ll be happy to help.”

Lily smiled. “I’m sure they will.”

Minerva excused herself soon thereafter, leaving Lily to gather Severus’s possessions. It was an easier job than she’d expected, the items neatly stored in a small collection of metal boxes. Shrinking them down, she stuffed them in the satchel she’d transfigured, checking the office one last time before she entered their quarters.

“Books,” she muttered as she headed for the study. Tossing them in the satchel along with his clothes, she gathered his personal hygiene items, followed by the potions he’d kept under the sink.

After that, she turned her attention to her own things, realizing that she’d somehow managed to accumulate a sizable wardrobe. She discarded most of it, deciding to transfigure some looser clothing as soon as they made it home.

Home...

She couldn’t help feeling melancholy, remembering that *this* had been her home for nearly a year. It was where she’d learned to be human again, where she and Severus had reconciled their past, even as they’d struggled to create a brighter future. Each room held a special significance, though it was the bedroom that seemed to call out to her. She wandered over to the bed, hardly realizing what she was doing as she shed her cloak and slipped beneath the blankets.

They still smelled like him, warm and intimately familiar, her eyes drifting closed as she lost herself in a thousand memories. This was where they’d been on the first morning they’d ever made love, followed by the night they’d conceived their child. But most of all, it was where they’d slept for nights beyond counting, her head resting on his chest as he’d held her in the darkness.

In the end, it wasn’t their quarters she’d been missing. It was him. She missed falling asleep in his arms, lulled by the steady thrum of his heartbeat. If she kept her eyes closed, she

could almost feel it, her melancholy giving way to a drowsy sort of comfort. She reached up to stifle a yawn, reminding herself that she needed to get back to the Hospital Wing.

“Five more minutes,” she mumbled, snuggling deeper into the blankets.

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When Severus woke up, Lily was nowhere to be found.

Of course, that was nothing unusual. She’d been out and about more often than not, visiting Harry in Gryffindor tower or taking tea with Minerva and Molly. He didn’t begrudge her these excursions, understanding her need to connect with others after so many years of isolation. Granted, he was bored out of his skull, but it was hardly her job to keep him entertained.

It had gotten easier since Poppy had lifted some of her restrictions. She’d been allowing him out for short walks, even permitting him to spend a couple hours in the library here and there. He tried not to venture out until everyone was asleep, doing everything he could to avoid prying eyes. Lily and Harry had been working hard to clear his name, but there were plenty who still doubted him, including the swarm of reporters who’d been camping out around the school.

“Going for a walk?”

He inclined his head, glad that the gesture no longer caused him pain. “I assume that the daily onslaught of reporters has dissipated somewhat?”

“I went to the Great Hall about an hour ago and didn’t see any.”

“Good,” he said, leaning down to put on his boots as Poppy handed him his frock coat. “I’m just going to check on Lily. She’s usually back by now.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about her. Minerva told me that she’d gone upstairs to pack.”

“Yes, well, I’ll see if she needs any assistance.”

To his relief, the halls were deserted, no sound but his own footsteps as he made his way to the Headmaster’s office. He paused at the gargoyle, shaking his head as he remembered that he didn’t need a password. Minerva might’ve been handling his duties for the past few weeks, but technically speaking, he was still headmaster.

Whether he would remain so? Well, that wasn’t a decision he was ready to make just yet.

Several of the portraits greeted him as soon as he stepped inside, though one in particular remained silent. He could feel Dumbledore watching him, refusing to look over his shoulder as he turned his attention to a different portrait.

“Lily?”

“In there,” Phineas said, gesturing at the tapestry with an elegant hand.

“Thank you.”

Clearly, Lily didn’t need his help. He could see that as soon as he entered their quarters, impressed that she’d done such a thorough job. The counters were bare, an empty space on

the bookshelf where he'd kept his small collection. Even the table was wiped clean, no trace of the clutter that had accumulated throughout the year.

"Lily?" he called softly, his eyes sweeping across the study one last time before he headed to the bedroom.

The room was completely dark, with the exception of the soft moonlight that poured in through the window. As for Lily, she was fast asleep, her expression utterly peaceful as she shifted onto her side. He didn't want to disturb her, well aware that she'd had trouble sleeping as of late. Instead, he unbuttoned his frock coat, ridding himself of his shirt and boots before he slipped into bed beside her.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"For what?"

"Didn't mean to fall asleep here, just..."

He shook his head, wrapping an arm around her waist as he closed the distance between them. "It's all right," he said. "Go back to sleep."

With that, he let his own eyes drift closed, stroking her back with the tips of his fingers. He'd forgotten how good it felt to lie beside her, soothed by her comforting warmth as her soft breath tickled his neck.

"You should really..." She sighed, pressing herself a little closer. "Poppy..."

"Poppy," he interrupted, "can bugger off."

"I'll be sure to tell her you said that."

"Yes, well..." He yawned. "It's our final night at Hogwarts. We should be able to spend it..."

"Our final night," she repeated. "Does that mean we won't be coming back?"

"Honestly? I don't know."

---

Lily made sure that Severus was asleep before she rose from the bed, tiptoeing to the bathroom on silent feet. She made a brief attempt to fix her hair before she shrugged, deciding that she wasn't willing to go to that much effort for a portrait.

"Good evening, Lily," said a familiar voice as she settled herself behind the desk. "May I take the liberty of congratulating you?"

"For what?"

"Isn't it obvious? Indeed, I'm surprised I didn't notice sooner."

"Yes, well..." She shrugged, bringing her hands to rest on her protruding stomach. "I made sure you didn't."

"Why?"

"Because it was none of your business."

"I see," he said, his tone pleasant. "Well, I'll be sure to extend my best wishes to Severus... if he ever decides to stop avoiding me, that is."

"Can you blame him? He nearly died because of you!"

"I believe it was Lord Voldemort who cast that spell. I had no part in it, I assure you."

"So you *didn't* lead Voldemort to believe that Severus was master of the Elder Wand? You *didn't* keep that information to yourself, never bothering to warn either of us?"

"If you'll allow me to explain..."

"You know what? I don't want to hear any more of your excuses. I don't want to talk about Voldemort or the battle, or... it's over now. I just came here to tell you one thing."

"What's that?"

"Thank you."

"Pardon?"

"Thank you," she repeated, "for telling the truth about Harry. I haven't always agreed with your actions, but I do have to admit that everything worked out for the best. Not that you deserve all the credit, but I don't want to hold onto old grudges. I'm ready to move on."

The portrait nodded, motioning for her to continue.

"There are some things that belong in the past. Dead and buried, never to be spoken of again. Do you know what I mean?"

"I believe so."

She hesitated. "Has Harry come to see you?"

"He's visited a few times, yes."

"Have you told him anything about me?"

"Only that I didn't find out about you until recently," the portrait said. "And that my flesh and blood counterpart was never aware of your survival."

"Good." She leaned back in her chair, sighing in relief. "For all his flaws, Harry has always seen Dumbledore as a hero. I see no reason for that to change, as long as he isn't harmed by that perception."

"I didn't harm..."

"No," she agreed. "*You* didn't. You're not the real Dumbledore, after all. The *real* Dumbledore is dead. I'll never get any closure from him, never be able to confront him about the things he did. That's why I have to let go."

"Because he's already gone?" the portrait said.

"Exactly."

"So where does that leave me?"

She sighed. "Be a friend to Harry. You have my blessing, as long as you give him the best of who Dumbledore was."

The portrait inclined his head. "That sounds fair."

"No more scheming," she said, narrowing her eyes. "No manipulation. If you try anything, I'll find out, and I *will* put a stop to it."

"Understood."

"As for our secret..."

"Harry will never know."

"*No one* can know," she corrected. "Not Harry, not Severus, nor anyone else you might speak with."

"Agreed."

"All right," she said as she rose to her feet. "I guess that's it then."

"Wait."

"What for?"

The portrait gazed at her intently, his eyes so uncannily like Dumbledore's that it sent a chill up her spine.

"I might not be the real Dumbledore, but he imbued me with the power to speak from his heart. Trust me when I tell you that he never wanted to hurt either of them, that he deeply regretted every misfortune they suffered. He saved Harry, of course, and if he'd seen a way to do it, he would've tried to save Severus, too."

'Then why didn't he...'

"Because none of us are born with all the answers, not even Albus Dumbledore himself. He was only human, and it is human to make mistakes. It might be easy to judge his actions, but he was carrying an unimaginable burden. Who can know the cost of such a burden other than the one who bears it?"

Lily shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

"Indeed, we cannot know. But we *can* learn to let go of the past, can't we?"

'Yes,' she said quietly. 'I suppose we can.'

---

Severus jerked awake, alarmed by the bright rays of sunlight that slanted across the bed. Bloody hell, he was late for work. There was no telling what the Carrows had been up to in his absence, not to mention...

"Fuck," he muttered, ignoring the soreness in his throat as he pointed his wand at the wardrobe. Realizing that it was empty, he glanced over at Lily, though that only added to his bewilderment. Her stomach appeared to have grown overnight, nearly twice the size it had

been the last time he'd seen it. He reached out to touch it, gasping as he caught a glimpse of his forearm.

The Dark Mark was gone.

With that, his nightmare faded, replaced by a reality that was far more pleasant. Voldemort was defeated. Severus had survived to see him fall. Lily would be going home with him today, both of them free from any danger as they prepared for the birth of their child.

"Severus?" Lily mumbled. "Are you all right?"

"Fine."

"You're shaking."

"I'm fine," he repeated, taking his hand off her stomach. "Go back to sleep."

Treating himself to a long, hot shower, he slung a cloak over his shoulders as he strode down the hall. He stepped out into the Headmaster's office, settling himself behind the desk before he ordered up a pot of strong black coffee. Granted, he still wasn't in the mood to do this, but now more than ever, he knew there were ghosts that needed to be laid to rest.

"Good morning, Severus."

He flinched, keeping his back to the portrait. "Dumbledore."

"I'd heard you were on the mend, though I must say, you're looking even better than I expected."

"No thanks to you."

He'd almost gotten used to the huskiness in his voice, the occasional hiccups in his speech. Poppy had said it would improve with time, though some change was likely to be permanent due to the scarring in his throat. It hadn't troubled him too much, though he hated the thought of showing any weakness in front of Dumbledore. He would've preferred to let him think he'd come through the battle unscathed, though of course, he didn't have that option. Even if his damaged voice hadn't betrayed him, he knew very well that Dumbledore had made quite a few visits to the Hospital Wing.

"I did what was necessary..."

"*Necessary?* You claimed to trust me, only to withhold the most crucial bit of information."

"If you'd known your fate in advance, how could you have found the strength..."

"*You* did," he shot back. "You had nearly a year to contemplate your death. You *knew* how it would happen, yet you *still* managed to..."

"Yes, but it's a heavy burden to carry, Severus. Heavier than you can imagine. I didn't want to inflict that on you."

"I already believed I was going to die. A belief you never did anything to discourage, I might add."

"But that was never certain," Dumbledore pointed out. "You still had reason to hope."

*"Fuck hope!"* he snarled, finally spinning around to face the portrait. "I had a right to know the truth, to make sure I was prepared! Do you know how close I came to failure? If the boy had shown up even a couple minutes later..."

"But he didn't. You were able to pass your message along, Voldemort was destroyed, and the both of you survived. Perhaps it might be time to count your blessings?"

"My *blessings*," he repeated. "Whenever I think about my blessings, I can't forget how close I came to losing them. All because *you* didn't think I was brave enough..."

"I never said..."

"How could you have found the strength?" Severus quoted back at him. "You said it about me, and you said it about the boy. You didn't trust either of us to..."

"There was no one I trusted more than you, Severus. No one."

Severus shook his head. "You trusted no one but yourself."

Dumbledore leaned back in his painted chair, letting out a heavy sigh. "What is your point?"

"Only this," Severus said. "You were wrong. That's what I came to tell you. You were wrong about me, and you were wrong about Harry."

"Addressing him by his first name now? That's an interesting development."

"Don't change the subject. You led us both like pigs to the slaughter. You never understood..."

"Understood what?"

Severus sighed, pausing for a sip of coffee. He hadn't talked so much since before his injury, wincing at the soreness in his throat.

"That it wasn't necessary," he said after a moment. "All your secrecy, your manipulation, using our weaknesses against us. We would've followed you freely, even if we'd known what to expect."

"I agree."

"What?" he stared at the portrait, shocked.

"I agree with you."

"If you knew you were wrong, then why..."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Only a recent epiphany, I assure you. No doubt my fleshly counterpart went to his grave believing he had all the answers."

"What's the difference?"

"Difference?"

"Between you and him."

"Several containers of paint, for one."



Severus rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean."

The portrait sighed. "Honestly? I don't know. Everything he was, everything he thought, felt, and believed was left with me. But I've seen many things over the past year, all of which he never got to experience. Perhaps that has helped change my perspective."

"If that's true, then why have you insisted on following *his* course of action?"

"He gave me no choice. Rather like you, I suppose. I was... compelled to follow his instructions."

"Indeed?"

The portrait inclined his head. "Of course, I've found a few loopholes here and there."

Taking another sip of coffee, Severus motioned for him to continue.

"As thorough as Dumbledore was, there were some situations he would've never thought to prepare me for. Meeting Lily, for example. I could talk to her freely, though it took me a while to figure that out. That's how I was able to tell her about her son."

Severus frowned. "What about him?"

"That his life would be spared."

"Lily *knew*?"

"Oh, yes. She came to me the night before the battle, demanding that I reveal my plans for Harry. She didn't tell you?"

"No, I'm afraid she didn't."

"Well, I suppose she wouldn't have, at least at the time. It was crucial for Harry to believe he had to die, which meant that you had to believe it, too."

Severus sat silent, mulling over this new revelation. It made sense, especially when he remembered Lily's relative calm on the night of the battle. Granted, he wasn't thrilled to find out from the portrait rather than Lily herself, but he had to admit that she'd had little opportunity to tell him.

"So you told her," he said, "and she believed you?"

"She did."

"I see. What else was said?"

"Well, she asked about you."

"What about me?"

"She wanted to know what Dumbledore was planning for you, whether there was anything she could do to stop it. I think she feared that your death was inevitable."

"And what did you tell her?"

"I said that nothing was set in stone."

"You failed to mention the Elder Wand?"

The portrait shook his head. "That information was never imparted to me."

Severus stared at Dumbledore's likeness, his mouth dropping open in disbelief. And then he started to laugh, unable to stop himself until he felt tears running down his cheeks. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed so hard, enjoying the feeling so much that he hardly even noticed the ache in his throat.

"You..." He hesitated, taking a minute to catch his breath. "You're telling me that he didn't even trust *his own portrait*?"

"It would seem so." Dumbledore's expression was solemn, though his eyes were filled with mirth. "Which is why I'd urge you not to take his actions too personally. After all, it is difficult to trust others when you can't even trust yourself."

"Yes, well..."

He trailed off as he heard a noise behind him, turning his head to see Lily as she pushed the tapestry aside. She was dressed in a pale green robe, carrying the satchel that held their possessions.

"Am I interrupting?" she said, glancing from him to the portrait.

"Not at all. Here, let me take that."

Severus could feel the portrait watching him as he rose to his feet, accepting the satchel before he looked back over his shoulder. Dumbledore was smiling, looking entirely too pleased with himself as he studied them both.

"Will you be returning next year?"

"I don't..."

"He doesn't know," Lily interrupted. "He has until August to decide."

"Well," said the portrait, "I hope to see the two of you again, along with that baby of yours. Either way, do make sure to enjoy the rest of your lives. After everything you've been through, I'd say you deserve it."

Severus nearly snorted, though he managed to restrain himself for Lily's sake. She'd always been sentimental when it came to goodbyes, which became increasingly obvious once they'd made it downstairs. She sniffled as she said goodbye to Minerva, her cheeks wet with tears as she pulled Harry in for one last hug. Naturally, he'd reminded her that she could see them whenever she pleased, but his words seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. Her eyes were red and puffy by the time they made it to the Front Gate, her expression wistful as she glanced back at the castle.

But then she turned to face him, smiling as she lifted her eyes to meet his.

"Ready?"

He nodded, holding her close as he Apparated them home.

## 89. Finding Home

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### Chapter 89: Finding Home

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"I refuse to raise our child here."

Those were the first words out of Severus's mouth when they arrived at Spinner's End, his nose wrinkling in disgust as he stared at the shabby living room.

"It isn't so bad," Lily said as she settled herself on the threadbare couch. "If we just spruce it up a bit, get rid of all this dust..."

"She deserves a fresh start, Lily. We all do."

"Well, I wouldn't mind moving, but it isn't that simple. I don't have any money, and you..."

"Have no shortage of it. Problem solved."

"Really?"

He nodded, summoning a tray from the other room. "Tea?"

"How did you... I mean, I thought..."

"You thought I was impoverished?" He smirked, using his wand to fill the teapot with water. "I might've lived as a poor man, but that doesn't mean I *am* one. As it happens, my frugality has allowed me to save quite a bit over the years."

"Enough to buy a house?"

Reaching into the satchel, he withdrew one of the boxes he'd kept in his desk at Hogwarts. He used an incantation to open the lid, shuffling through various slips of parchment until he located his most recent statement from Gringotts.

"Have a look," he said casually, holding it up for her inspection.

Her eyes widened.

"Yes, I can afford to purchase a house... or several, if you'd prefer."

"I had no idea that Hogwarts professors..."

"The salary was decent, though that has never been my only source of income. I've invented several potions which have brought in a good revenue, and I also receive annual payments on my inheritance."

"Your *inheritance*?"

He inclined his head. "As of six years ago, I am the only surviving member of the Prince family. The properties have long since been sold off, but it seems my grandparents maintained holdings in several businesses. I receive a share of the profits each year, as will our offspring when both of us are gone."

Hesitating, she accepted a cup of tea. "That's reassuring."

"Yes," he agreed, "though I'd rather discuss our immediate future. What kind of house would you like?"

"Nothing too big," she said slowly, "though it would be nice to have plenty of room. And I'd like... I think I'd like to live away from the city, maybe have some land of our own? I've always wanted a garden."

"Then you shall have one."

"What about you?"

"Pardon?"

"What do *you* want?"

He shrugged. "A bit of privacy, space for my books, perhaps a room I can convert into a potions lab. Beyond that, I have no preference."

"We'll need at least three bedrooms. Preferably four."

"*Four?*" He glanced at her stomach, worried by the implications. Granted, he'd adjusted to the idea of one child, but *several*? Despite himself, he couldn't help picturing the Weasleys' overstuffed household.

"I'd like to have a guest room," she said. "Two if we can manage it. I know Harry isn't ready to stay with us quite yet, but I'm hoping..."

"Say no more," he interrupted, closing his eyes in relief. "We'll start looking tomorrow."

---

They were having breakfast the next morning when the first owl arrived, carrying a letter addressed in Harry's familiar scrawl. That was followed by a second one from Molly, inviting Lily to join them for their first dinner back at the Burrow. As for the *third* letter...

"Bloody hell," Severus muttered, slamming his coffee cup down on the table.

"What is it?"

"Oh, just a friendly note from the Ministry. I'm being summoned for questioning."

Lily frowned. "But everyone knows that..."

"That *what*? That based on hearsay, I *wasn't* a traitor? Even if that was enough for them, which I *sincerely* doubt, I still have a great deal to answer for."

"Like what?"

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Killing one of the most beloved figures the Wizarding world has ever known? Or how about the excessive punishments that were meted out while Hogwarts was under my charge? Indeed, why should it matter that their own children were subjected to the Cruciatus?”

“You did everything you could to protect them. You couldn’t have...”

He barely heard her, snarling at the letter before he flung it away. It was no more than he’d expected, though he’d hoped that the Ministry’s usual incompetence would buy him a little more time. Weeks... months... a chance to catch his breath as he helped Lily prepare for the birth of their child. Was that too much to ask?

Apparently so.

Hell, for all he knew, he might not even *be* there when her time came. If they chose to lock him up in Azkaban...

And that was the truth of it, the fear that lay just beneath his anger. Perhaps he’d be able to avoid spending his life in prison, but there was nothing to stop the Ministry from stashing him there as he awaited his trial.

“Severus...”

Something in her voice made him open his eyes, fury replaced by guilt as he realized that she was crying.

“Don’t,” he said, making an effort to calm down. “Please. I didn’t mean...”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No.”

“But I’m the best witness you have! I can tell them...”

He shook his head. “For the time being, I’m only wanted for questioning, which is likely to be done in private.”

“But if I can just...”

“They won’t allow you to testify. Not until you’re officially summoned. In the meantime...” Glancing at the letters she’d received, he managed a smirk. “Enjoy your dinner with the Weasley clan.”

Fortunately, he’d already arranged for her to have access to his Gringotts vault. There was nothing to do but leave her the key, along with stern instructions to purchase whatever she might need while he was gone. With that, he pocketed his coin, promising to send her regular updates.

“When will you be home?” she said, rising on her tiptoes to kiss him goodbye.

“I can’t be sure. Before midnight, I hope.”

Technically speaking, Severus *did* return before midnight. He walked through the door at Spinner's End at 8:47 PM... two months after he'd departed.

He wasn't detained in Azkaban, though the Ministry insisted that he remain on the premises. They gave him a room with a hard bed and little else in the way of comfort, summoning him each day to testify against various Death Eaters. That was how he spent the rest of May and all of June, his own trial delayed until July 16.

*Molly invited me to stay at the Burrow*, Lily wrote when it became clear that he wasn't coming home. *You don't mind, do you?*

*Not at all*, he replied. *On the contrary, I'm glad you won't be alone.*

*I wish you didn't have to be alone either.*

He shrugged it off, assuring her that the situation was only temporary. As for how desperately he missed her, he kept that to himself, determined to focus on the bright side of their separation. If nothing else, it gave her plenty of time to spend with Harry, something she'd been missing out on for far too long. He enjoyed reading about their conversations, though he was particularly amused by their numerous trips to Diagon Alley.

*Fortescue's again?*

*What do you think?*

*I think*, he responded, *that you're attempting to spend my entire fortune on ice cream.*

Lily wasn't the only one who wrote him. He received a couple letters from Minerva, who made it clear that she intended to testify on his behalf. Several other professors let him know that they planned to do the same, including Charity, who'd recently been restored to human form. He heard from Molly several times, and Poppy wrote to inquire after his health.

In the end, it was Harry who surprised him the most. Their correspondence started with a brief note of thanks, though it quickly escalated from there. Severus had little to do in the evenings, after all, which gave him plenty of time to express himself with quill and parchment.

*I'll admit that I was a bit rigid at times...*

*You were an ass*, Harry shot back the next morning.

Severus chuckled, scrawling out a quick reply.

*20 points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter. Give my regards to your mother.*

Other letters were more serious, a sincere attempt to reconcile the past. Severus tried to be as open as possible, realizing that writing was the best format for these conversations. He couldn't imagine having them face to face, especially when it came to more personal subjects.

*My father was awful to you*, Harry wrote. *Sirius, too. The way they treated you wasn't fair, and I don't blame you for hating them. But you weren't fair either, assuming I was like that. I'm not, you know. I never was.*

*I know that now*, Severus replied. *I'm only sorry that I couldn't see it sooner.*

*I am, too. In some ways, though, maybe it was for the best.*

*How so?*

*Because we weren't supposed to like each other, were we? Wasn't that part of Dumbledore's plan? I mean, that was safer for us both, obviously, and when he died... well, that was bad enough when I thought you were my enemy. It would've been so much worse if I'd seen you as a friend.*

*An astute observation, Severus wrote. Regardless, that's another thing I should apologize for. Killing Dumbledore was hardly what I wanted, but the end result was the same. I'm sorry you had to suffer the loss of him.*

*You shouldn't apologize. Not for that. What he made you do was terrible, far worse than anything you ever did to me.*

*Yes, well, it's behind us now.*

*Do you forgive him?*

*I've... Severus hesitated, struggling to find the right words. I've made my peace with the situation. You?*

*I don't know, Harry said. I miss him and I'm sad that he's gone, but part of me is still angry at him for misleading me. Not just him, but Sirius, too. They were supposed to be the heroes, while you were... well, you know. And then there's my dad. They tried to make me think he could do no wrong, but he really was arrogant and a bully, and... I don't know, sir. I really don't know what to think.*

*I understand your confusion, Severus wrote back, though I don't think their deception was intentional. Gryffindors tend to perceive things in black and white, finding it difficult to see any flaw in the people they care for. Even when they do, they're much more inclined to excuse their actions, preferring to blame those who don't necessarily deserve it.*

*Like you?*

*Precisely, Severus replied, which is why I don't believe that Black intentionally withheld the truth about your father's bullying. To him, I imagine it was inconsequential, not to mention wholly justified. Naturally, that wasn't helped by Dumbledore, who turned a blind eye to all their misdeeds.*

*That must've been awful for you.*

*Severus was tempted to shrug it off, though he resisted the urge, knowing this wasn't the time to conceal his feelings. This was a boy who'd known precious little in the way of honesty, deceived by everyone around him. He deserved to know the truth, especially now that no harm could come from revealing it.*

*It was awful, he agreed. Of course, that doesn't excuse my actions, but I lived in a perpetual state of fear. There was no one I could turn to for help, including Dumbledore. All I had were the Slytherins, many of whom already had ties to Lord Voldemort. That, I suppose, was my own blind spot. I was willing to disregard many things in order to feel safe, to believe I had some value.*

*Did it work? Harry wrote back. I mean, before it all went bad?*

*No. Granted, I had skills that were considered useful, but that was all. I was, as Voldemort said shortly before his death, a tool to be used and discarded. Of course, by the time I realized that, it was already too late. I'd lost the only person who'd ever made me feel valued, who'd cared about me for who I was. I was never able to forgive myself for that... which I suppose is why I was so unforgiving of others.*

*Have you forgiven yourself now?*

Severus pondered the question, sighing in relief as his quill scratched across the parchment.

*Yes, I suppose I have.*

He didn't hear from Harry until a couple days later, receiving a final roll of parchment the night before his trial was set to begin. Pushing his meager dinner aside, he read it once and then again, his eyes suspiciously moist as he set it on the bedside table.

*They can't send you to Azkaban. Voldemort would've never been defeated without your help, no matter what me or Dumbledore did. You saved us all, you know. Not just me and my mother, but the entire Wizarding world. If they can't see that... well, to use one of your own expressions, they're a bunch of dunderheads.*

*It doesn't matter why you did it. Even if it was all for her, you're still a good man. If you weren't, you would've never been willing to sacrifice so much. That's the difference between good and bad, at least in my opinion. It's being able to put others first, knowing when to set aside your own feelings and do what's right.*

*Sir, I wish you the best of luck tomorrow, though I don't think you'll need it. You've got plenty of people on your side, and none of us are the type to go down without a fight.*

That letter was with him when he appeared before the Wizengamot the next morning, tucked in his pocket like a lucky talisman. Meanwhile, Harry was there in the flesh, their eyes meeting for an infinitesimal moment before he leaned over to whisper to his mother.

Lily...

Severus stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes widening. Eight months pregnant and she certainly looked it, her cream colored robes cut loose to accommodate a belly that had grown enormous in his absence. He'd known that time was running short, but seeing the evidence for himself? That was something else entirely.

"Severus Snape!" called a cold, gruff voice. "Be seated."

Tearing his eyes from Lily, he moved to the chair in the center of the room.

"Very well, shall we begin? Severus Snape, you are called to answer for the crime of murder, in addition to a number of other charges. These would include..."

---

The trial lasted a week, each day stretching from dawn until nightfall. Dozens of witnesses were brought forward to testify, including several witches and wizards that Severus was quite



sure he'd never seen before.

"He murdered three Muggles! Tortured them for hours, left them to die in the street!"

"Thank you, Mr. Thornberry. Can you tell us where this incident occurred?"

"Dover, right down the street from my home."

"Do you recall the date?"

"Halloween. Started early that morning, though I'd say it was around noon by the time he finished."

"Impossible," Severus said, relieved when he wasn't silenced. "I was at Hogwarts, which happens to be hundreds of miles away."

"Can you provide any proof..."

"I can," Minerva interrupted as she rose to her feet. She unfurled a roll of parchment, studying it with narrowed eyes before she presented it to the Wizengamot. "According to our records, Headmaster Snape substituted for Professor Slughorn that day. That should stand as sufficient proof, though if you need further confirmation, there are numerous students who'd be willing to..."

"That won't be necessary," said the Chief Warlock. "Thank you, Professor McGonagall."

"It was *him*! I know it was!"

"Let me guess," Severus said dryly. "This individual was wearing a mask?"

Thornberry nodded, refusing to meet his eyes. He was dismissed soon thereafter, his testimony stricken from the record as he was escorted from the room.

It wasn't until the final day that Harry took the stand, followed by his mother. Theirs were the testimonies that seemed to sway the Wizengamot the most, bringing numerous witches and wizards to tears by the time they'd finished. It was all Severus could do to maintain his own composure, his hands trembling as he awaited the verdict.

"The Wizengamot has come to a decision," announced the Chief Warlock. "Severus Snape, we acquit you on all charges. You are free to go."

The room erupted into thunderous applause, though Severus barely heard it, his body going limp as his head fell back against the chair. Only then did he realize how frightened he'd been, refusing to get his hopes up in case it all went wrong.

"Severus?"

He opened his eyes to find Lily beside him, her cheeks wet with tears as she helped him to his feet. Somehow, she guided them both into the hall, matching her pace to his halting footsteps.

"There's Minerva. Would you like to..."

"I want to go home."

"All right," she said gently. "Just give me a second to say goodbye."

The next thing he knew, they'd made it outside, his eyes fluttering closed as the cool night air caressed his skin. He hadn't been outdoors in two months, taking a minute to enjoy the sensation before Lily Apparated them home.

"Tea?"

He nodded, settling himself in his worn armchair as she summoned the tray. She fixed them both a cup, seeming to understand his need for solitude as she disappeared into the kitchen. Only then did his head begin to clear somewhat, aided by the strongest dose of caffeine he'd had in months.

Free... he was finally free.

He'd had a taste of freedom when Voldemort had fallen, though he'd feared it was only temporary. Sooner or later, he'd known his past would catch up with him, finding it hard to believe that the Wizarding world would allow him to live in peace. He'd lived with their suspicions for far too long, after all, not to mention the sheer ferocity of their hatred.

Yet somehow, that hatred had dissipated, giving way to an acceptance that defied all expectation. He'd been stunned to see how many were willing to testify in his defense, from professors he'd supposedly betrayed to students he'd tormented for years. Even Neville Longbottom had taken the stand, portraying him as merciful rather than cruel.

Did he deserve it? Perhaps not, but he was certainly willing to accept the results.

"Severus? I'm sorry to disturb you, but..."

He blinked, shaking his head as Lily set a plate of food on the table beside him.

"You're not disturbing me. Come. Sit."

She smiled, summoning her own plate before she settled herself on the couch.

"I must apologize," he said after a moment.

"For what?"

"I haven't seen you in months, and here I am..."

"Recovering?"

He nodded, swallowing a bite of roast beef. "Something like that."

"That's understandable," she said. "How are you feeling now?"

"I can honestly say that I've never been better. You?"

"Well, I've been feeling pretty wretched, though I *am* happy to have you home."

He frowned. "Have you been unwell?"

"I'm pregnant, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Yes, but aside from..." He trailed off, realizing he was treading on dangerous ground. "I imagine you must be uncomfortable."

She snorted. "You have no idea."

He inclined his head, conceding the point. "If there's anything I can do to make you feel better..."

'You can rub my back if you want.'

Setting his plate aside, he moved over to the couch, positioning himself behind her. It took a bit of trial and error, his efforts rewarded by a soft moan as he lowered his hands to the base of her spine.

"Oh yes," she murmured. "Right there."

Ignoring his own body's reaction, he focused on hers, fascinated by all the changes that had occurred over the past two months. Her curves were more pronounced, from the contours of her hips to breasts that had clearly grown in his absence. But it was her stomach that mesmerized him the most, swollen with a child that would be born in a matter of weeks.

"She's moving," Lily said, as if sensing the direction of his thoughts. "Do you want to feel it?"

He responded by sliding his hands around to her stomach, his eyes widening.

"Dear god..."

She chuckled. "Tell me about it."

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes, though that's normal in the last few weeks or so."

"I see," he said, hesitating as he felt another sharp jab against his palm. "Well, depending on how you feel about it, I'd still like to relocate before she arrives. I realize we don't have much time, but..."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you! Harry and I have been looking, and we found the loveliest little cottage! It's only a few miles from the Burrow."

"I'll try not to hold that against it. Continue."

"It's a bit small, but the rooms are quite spacious. It has a garden and a wrought iron fence, and..."

"Did you buy it?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't do that without your approval, especially since it's your money."

"Everything I have is yours," he said with a shrug. "Besides, there would've been no harm in taking the chance. That which is bought can always be sold."

"There was no harm in waiting either."

"Are you sure? What if it's no longer available?"

Her lips twitched. "It's for sale on the *Muggle* market."

"Ah, I see. Repelling jinx?"

“Harry’s idea, not mine.”

He smirked, holding a hand out to help her to her feet. “I’ll have a look at it in the morning. For now, I imagine we both could use some sleep.”

---

Severus decided to stop at Gringotts first, converting a sizable portion of Galleons into Muggle money. Of course, that was no guarantee, but he couldn’t imagine rejecting the place when Lily’s heart was so obviously set on living there.

“You’ll tell me the truth, right? I mean, if you don’t like it...”

“Of course I will,” he lied smoothly.

Fortunately, that was the only lie he was forced to tell that day, his breath catching in his throat as soon as he spotted the cottage. It was covered in ivy, a simple stone structure that looked as if it had been standing there for hundreds of years. Granted, it was nothing fancy, but it had a unique charm, which he infinitely preferred.

“See the garden?”

He nodded, his eyes drawn to a wild profusion of summer roses. The garden was terribly overgrown, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Whatever they planted there would be likely to flourish, aided by what appeared to be rich soil and a nearby water source.

“The fence is quite convenient,” he remarked, pleased that it was much taller than he’d expected. Between that and the towering oaks that were scattered throughout the property, they’d have no shortage of privacy.

“*Alohomora*.”

He followed Lily inside, equally impressed by the interior. The first floor was dominated by a kitchen and spacious living room, along with a fully equipped bathroom and study. The last one was his favorite, a cozy little room paneled in dark wood.

“We could put shelves along the walls,” she said. “I don’t know if they’d hold *all* your books, but the rest could go in the living room.”

“True,” he replied, trailing in her wake as she made her way upstairs. There were three bedrooms, the two smaller ones separated by a shared bathroom.

“This one would be ours,” she said, opening the door to a large, airy room that featured the same wood paneling he’d seen downstairs.

“Well,” he said, peering into the twin closets. “We’d certainly have plenty of room.”

“And our own bathroom, too.”

Grunting his approval, he followed her back downstairs, watching curiously as she opened a door he hadn’t noticed the first time they’d passed through the kitchen.

“I’m not sure what you wanted in a potions lab,” she said, panting slightly as she made her way down the steps. “But there’s lots of space down here.”

He peered over her shoulder, his eyes widening as they swept across the basement. It was the only room that hadn't been modernized, walls and floor crafted out of rough hewn stone. Part of it was underground, but there was a pair of windows on the opposite wall, soft rays of sunlight slanting across the floor.

"There's a door, too. See? It leads to the garden."

"Where's the Muggle?" he said abruptly.

"What?"

"The Muggle," he repeated. "I wish to buy this property."

---

It took two days to finalize the transaction, another three to move in. He left Lily at Spinner's End, relieved when Molly offered to stay with her in his absence. She wasn't due for another three weeks, but she looked like she might go into labor at any moment, one hand resting on her swollen belly as she lay on the couch.

"Just get a comfortable bed," she muttered. "That's all I ask."

He wasn't surprised when Harry offered to help, though he certainly wasn't expecting Ron and Hermione to come along. They accompanied him to all the shops, a situation that seemed increasingly bizarre as they entered the maternity store. Shopping for a newborn baby with the Golden Trio in tow? Of all the places he'd imagined he might end up...

"All right then," Hermione said brightly. "Where shall we start?"

He gave her a helpless look. "I have no idea."

"Well, you'll need a crib, of course. Clothes, bedding, diapers..."

"Toys," Ron interjected.

"Right. You and Harry go take care of that. Professor Snape and I will handle the rest."

In years past, Severus had been annoyed by the girl's bossiness. Now he appreciated the way she took charge, even when *he* was the one she ordered around. Thanks to her, their shopping trip was quick and efficient, resulting in quite a few items he would've never thought to purchase if he'd been on his own. She even helped him figure out how to arrange the furniture, leaving the boys to take care of the rooms downstairs as she decorated the bedrooms.

"Professor Snape?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I think we're finished."

---

"Oh, Severus," Lily said as her eyes swept across the living room. "It's beautiful."

He'd chosen earth tones, shades of rust, cream, and rich browns, wrought iron sconces lining the walls. There was an overstuffed couch and a set of comfortable looking armchairs, covered in plush, velvety fabric that begged to be touched. Resisting the urge to sit down, she trailed her fingers across the surface of a mahogany table, murmuring in approval as she peeked into the study.

"The kitchen is fully stocked," Severus said. "Would you like something to eat?"

"Please, no. Molly has been feeding me nonstop."

"Shall we go upstairs then?"

She nodded, accepting the arm he offered. "I can't believe you managed all this in less than a week."

"To be fair," he said as they reached the top of the stairs, "I didn't do it alone."

"Which one is the nursery?"

He opened the closest door, waiting behind her as she stepped inside.

"Wow."

The walls were pale yellow, complemented by touches of gentle greens and blues. There was a crib on one side and a bassinet on the other, crafted out of wicker that matched the dresser and changing table. He'd even bought clothes for the baby, along with an impressive collection of stuffed animals and other toys.

"How did you..." She trailed off, staring at the elaborate mobile that was positioned above the crib.

He shrugged. "Blame your son. Thanks to him and Weasley, our child will have more toys than she could ever possibly use."

To say she was touched would've been an understatement. It was all she could do to maintain her composure, taking one last look at the beautiful little nursery before she followed Severus across the hall.

"This, of course, would be our room."

"Oh..."

It was decorated in the same earth tones as downstairs, except for the deep, rich green of the drapery. The color was a perfect match for the bedspread, which was patterned with ivy and tiny white flowers.

"Miss Granger," he said, following the direction of her eyes. "She thought you might like it."

"It's perfect."

He grunted, pointing at the closet next to the bathroom. "That one's yours."

With that, he opened his own closet, removing his boots, followed by his frock coat and shirt. He rid himself of his trousers, too, his bare body illuminated beneath the candlelight as he stretched out on the bed.

"I'll be out in a minute," she said, grabbing a modest nightgown before she shut herself in the bathroom. Slipping out of her robes, she stared at herself in the mirror, cringing at what she saw. Her stomach was enormous, her breasts so swollen that she hardly recognized them as hers. She'd gained weight in other places, too, from the plumpness in her cheeks to her newly rounded backside.

Still, she couldn't bring herself to put on the nightgown. Just the thought of wrapping herself in yards of fabric, sweltering in the late July heat...

She shrugged, taking a minute to relieve herself before she exited the bathroom.

"I know I look grotesque, but it's too bloody hot for..." She trailed off, her eyes widening as she spotted his growing erection. "You can't be serious."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

To her surprise, she felt her body respond, her breath coming a little faster as she eased herself onto the bed. How long had it been since they'd made love? Not since before the battle, she realized, which had been almost three months ago.

"I'll understand if you don't feel like..."

"No, I do," she said hastily. "It might be a bit awkward, but..."

"I don't care."

He kissed her then, hard and hungry, groaning low in his throat as he brought his mouth to her neck, her ear, dragging his tongue across a swollen nipple as she shivered in anticipation. By then, she wanted it as badly as he did, struggling to lift her hips as he tugged at her underwear.

"How?" he said, his voice trembling with need. "I can't wait, I... tell me how to..."

In response, she shifted to her hands and knees, hearing him grunt in approval as he ran his hands down the length of her back. His urgency left no room for caution, his fingers digging into her hips as he entered her with a forceful thrust.

"Oh god..."

He hesitated, his breath coming in harsh pants as he leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

"If I hurt you..."

"You won't. Just... don't stop."

She closed her eyes as he started to move, lost to the rhythm as she rocked her hips back to meet his pounding thrusts. Close, so close, but she couldn't quite manage it, knowing she was running out of time as he let out a shuddering groan.

"Wait."

She shifted onto her back, thrusting a pillow behind her as she scooted her hips to the edge of the bed. Holding his gaze, she slid her hands down her body, dipping her fingers between her thighs as she parted them in invitation.

"Fuck."

The next thing she knew, he was inside her again, his thrusts quick and frantic as he watched her pleasure herself. She knew it wouldn't take him long, but it didn't matter now. She cried out, once and then again, arching her back as wave after wave of pleasure shuddered through her.

Groaning in response, he leaned forward, bracing his hands on the bed.

"Lily..."

His body started to quiver, followed by a sharp gasp. He murmured something then, the words barely coherent as she felt him pulsing inside her.

She blinked. "What did you say?"

After a moment, he lifted his head, still panting as his eyes met hers.

"I said... marry me."

---

Lily settled herself at the table, gazing at the ring on her finger. It matched the jewelry that Severus had given her for Christmas, slender vines of antique silver wrapping around a single blossom. The petals were studded with diamonds, leaves of emerald glinting in the morning sunlight. With a wistful sigh, she slipped it off, placing it back in the box.

"Have you come to a decision?"

"I already told you I'd marry you. That is, if certain conditions are met."

"And I accept those conditions," Severus said as he set his paper aside. "That isn't what I'm speaking of, however. Have you come to a decision about the party?"

She shook her head, picking up the invitation she'd received the day before.

"I should be there. I mean, I want to, but..."

"Too much excitement?"

She nodded, though of course, she didn't need to tell him that. He knew she'd been having trouble sleeping, forced to visit the bathroom so often that it was a wonder she got any rest at all. And then there were the upset stomachs, the aches and pains, not to mention what a chore it had become simply to dress herself. She'd never been so exhausted, so irritable, prone to bursting into tears at the slightest provocation.

"You're almost nine months pregnant, Lily. I'm sure they'll understand."

"It's his 18th birthday, the first one I've been able to share with him since he was a baby. How can I not be there?"

"Is it Harry's company that's too much for you, or..."

"Of course not. It's a house full of Weasleys and all their friends that I'd rather not deal with."

"Then why not invite him over here? You could have a quiet breakfast, spend a few hours together before his party. That would seem like a better solution, even if you *weren't* feeling



unwell. You'd hardly get much time with him over there, what with all those Weasleys clamoring for his attention."

"True, but isn't it a little late? His birthday's tomorrow."

Severus shrugged. "You'll never know unless you ask."

---

The owl returned within the hour, informing Lily that Harry would be happy to have breakfast with her. He arrived at 9 AM the next morning, smiling shyly as she pulled him in for a hug.

"I hope you're hungry," she said as she led him into the kitchen.

"Starving."

"We have some gifts for you, too."

Harry nodded, glancing over at Severus. "Good morning, sir."

"Happy birthday, Mr. Potter," Severus said, pausing to swallow the last of his coffee. "Now if the two of you will excuse me, I think I'll head downstairs."

Harry frowned as he watched him leave. "Is he uncomfortable with me being here?"

"Oh no, he's fine! Just wanted to give us some time to ourselves, that's all."

"You sure?"

She smiled. "It was his idea to invite you over."

He looked relieved, dropping into a chair as she served him a plate of ham and eggs. Fixing one for herself, she settled herself across from him, pouring them both a glass of pumpkin juice as he devoured his meal.

"18 years old," she said. "I can hardly believe it."

"Me either," Harry agreed, shoving a piece of toast into his mouth. "Honestly though, just about everything seems unbelievable these days. I didn't think I'd even be alive to turn 18, let alone having breakfast with my mother."

"In a house owned by Severus Snape."

He laughed. "Yeah, that's one of the weirder parts, though I guess I'm getting used to it. He isn't so bad, is he?"

"Not at all."

"Are you going to marry him?"

She sucked in a sharp breath, nearly choking on a mouthful of ham. "Um, how would you feel about that?"

He shrugged. "I already figured things were headed in that direction, what with the new house and the baby and all. Honestly, I don't see what's stopping you."

“You.”

“Me?”

“I don’t want to do it without your blessing.” She hesitated, staring down at her plate. “I mean, I know you haven’t had a say in any of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Me and Severus, the baby... I never gave you a choice, did I?”

“Well,” Harry said, “it *isn’t* my choice. This is your life, not mine.”

“I know, but maybe I should’ve waited. Given you a chance to get used to the idea before I...”

“Why didn’t you?”

She sighed. “Because I loved him. He was all I had, the only person I never had to hide from. I didn’t know what would happen from one day to the next, and I... well, I guess I wanted to make the most of our time together. War makes everything seem urgent, you know? It’s hard to put things off when you know there are no guarantees.”

“I get it,” Harry said.

“You do?”

“Yeah, I do, which is why I’m glad you didn’t wait.”

“But the way he treated you...”

“He also protected me,” Harry pointed out, “even when I went out of my way to make it as difficult as possible. Granted, he was a nasty git, but knowing what I know now, it’s not hard to understand why.”

“You still didn’t deserve...”

“No,” he agreed. “But he knows he was wrong, and he’s apologized. What else can he do?”

“If I marry him,” she said, “he’ll be your stepfather. You *do* realize that, don’t you?”

Harry grimaced, though his lips were twitching. “Can’t be any worse than having him as my professor.”

“Are you saying...”

“I’m okay with it, Mum. Go ahead and marry him.”

She smiled, managing to blink back her tears. “Well, it won’t be anytime soon.”

“Why not?”

Setting her fork down, she pointed at her stomach. “This is going to keep me really busy, at least for the next few months.”

“Oh, right.”

“After that, I’m sure we can...” She trailed off, distracted by a cramp in her lower back.

“You all right, Mum?”

“Fine,” she said, smiling as the pain disappeared. “Head to the living room, yeah? I’ll be there in a minute.”

Pushing herself to her feet, she hurried to the bathroom, her eyes wide as she stared at herself in the mirror. Could she really be going into labor? If so, she had to be in the earliest stage, though with a full 14 hours before midnight, there was a reasonably good chance she’d deliver on Harry’s birthday .

Joining him in the living room, she decided to keep her suspicions to herself. The last thing she wanted to do was spoil his plans, especially when she wasn’t quite sure...

“This is from Snape?” he said, holding up the large crystal sphere.

She nodded, rubbing at another twinge in her back. “He picked it out himself.”

“I didn’t think he was into Divination.”

“He’s not,” she said. “Take a look at the booklet.”

“*Quidditch Through the Ages*,” he read aloud. “*A Visual Companion*. Tap twice with the tip of your wand and request the game you’d like to see.”

He did as instructed, his eyes widening as the sphere filled with tiny players. They whizzed back and forth, chasing a Snitch that was no bigger than a pea.

“This is brilliant.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “I’ll be sure to thank him before I leave.”

With that, she let out a whistle, smiling as a chocolate brown owl flew into the room.

“This is my gift,” she said. “I know you’ll never be able to replace Hedwig, but I thought...”

“What kind is it?”

“He’s a Spectacled Owl. Quite rare around here.”

Setting the sphere down, Harry stroked the owl’s downy feathers. It responded by hopping into his lap, seeming to thrive on the attention.

“Do you like him?”

“He’s great. Thanks, Mum.”

Harry stayed for another hour, sharing a bit of gossip from the Weasley household before they turned to more serious topics. He wanted to know more about their time in Godric’s Hollow, seeming particularly interested in the day he was born. Lily was glad to answer his questions, though it was unnerving to remember the birth of her first child when she was getting ready to deliver the second. Would it be easier this time? She certainly hoped so.

"I guess I better get going," he said, holding the sphere under one arm as he helped the owl into his cage. "It's almost noon, and I've got a few things to do before the party. I'll check with you in a couple days, all right? Maybe we can have lunch or something."

"That sounds lovely." She smiled, rising to give him a quick hug. "You have fun tonight, okay?"

"I will."

Once he was gone, she realized how desperately she needed a nap. It seemed to take forever to make it upstairs, her body so exhausted that she barely managed to undress before she collapsed on the mattress. She pressed a hand to her back, wincing through another mild contraction.

She'd decided not to tell Severus yet, hoping to get a little rest while she still had the chance. What she *didn't* expect was to sleep for a full five hours, awakening to discover that the contractions were gone.

"What's wrong?"

Wiping away her tears, she looked up to find Severus standing beside the bed.

"Nothing. It's just... I'm still pregnant."

"Well, you won't be for much longer."

"I know."

"If there's anything I can do..."

"There is *one* thing."

"What is it?"

She reached for an object on the bedside table, placing it in his hand. "Ask me again."

This time, he got down on one knee, withdrawing the ring from its box as he lifted his eyes to hers.

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"I will."

"No more conditions?"

She smiled. "None."

## 90. Family, Past and Present

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### Chapter 90: Family, Past and Present

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Lily did her best to ignore the false contractions, even as she anxiously awaited the onset of labor. According to her most recent charm, the baby weighed almost 9 pounds, her body swollen to the point of constant discomfort. She did everything she could think of to move things along, from eating spicy foods to taking a long walk in the garden. That only resulted in sore muscles and a terrible case of indigestion, her feet aching as she trudged up to bed.

"You're in the final month now," Severus pointed out. "It has to happen soon."

"Not soon enough."

"I'm sure it must feel that way, but..."

"I can't even sleep," she grumbled, wincing in response to a sharp kick in the ribs. "This baby is going to be the death of me."

"Nonsense. She'll be out before you know it, then you can rest all you like."

"With a newborn around? Somehow, I doubt that."

"Well, I'll be here to help."

She sighed, managing to bite back a sharp retort. In her experience, men didn't understand the first thing about babies, something she'd quickly learned after she'd given birth the first time. James had been thrilled with their son, but *she'd* been responsible for most of the feedings and dirty diapers, bathing Harry or comforting him when he was fussy. It wasn't that James had refused to help. He just hadn't realized how much work was involved, never seeming to understand why she was so exhausted.

But of course, Severus wasn't James. He was a grown man, one who had many years of experience with children. He'd never expect parenthood to be an easy job, nor would he be likely to treat their child like his own personal playmate.

That realization gave her a great deal of comfort, her voice more gentle when she spoke again.

"Do you really want to help?"

He nodded. "Just tell me what you need."

"Sex."

"Pardon?"

She shrugged. "Some of the books say it can help start labor. I don't know if that's true, but..."

“Well,” he said as he leaned over to kiss her neck. “I suppose there’s only one way to find out.”

For a brief time, her discomfort gave way to pleasure, his hands soothing the tension from her body as he entered her from behind. She lost herself to the sensation of him moving inside her, realizing that it might be quite some time before they were able to make love again. Only when he’d finished did she remember the reason for their encounter, his hand resting on her stomach as his warm breath tickled her ear.

“Do you feel anything?”

“No contractions, but I *do* feel...”

“What?” he prompted when she trailed off. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, not at all. I’m feeling a bit better, actually.”

“Really?”

She nodded, turning her head to give him a quick kiss. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

To her surprise, she slept all the way through the night, only having to get up twice to visit the bathroom. She woke just after dawn, exhaustion replaced by a restless energy she had no idea what to do with. Deciding to let Severus sleep, she took a long shower, wrapping herself in a lilac colored robe. She even managed to put on her shoes without any assistance, a feat she was immensely proud of as she headed downstairs.

Still, she couldn’t ignore the feeling that there was *something* she needed to do, though she couldn’t put her finger on what it was. The cottage was spotless, her bag already packed for St. Mungo’s. She had every item she could possibly need for the baby, not to mention...

*Petunia.*

The name flashed through her mind from out of nowhere, surprising in its intensity. She *definitely* had unfinished business with her sister, though was that really something she wanted to deal with when she was nine months pregnant?

Yes.

Better to do it now, since she didn’t intend on taking her daughter anywhere near the Dursleys. Besides, she’d been cooped up for weeks, eager to get out of the house now that she was feeling more like herself. She hurried to the study, retrieving the roll of parchment she’d received from the Order back in June. Tucking it in the pocket of her cloak, she wrote a quick note to Severus, letting him know that she’d be back before dinner.

---

“*Dear god!*”

“Hello, Petunia. It’s nice to see you, too.”

Petunia shook her head, her eyes sweeping over Lily from head to toe. “You’re alive.”

“Obviously. May I come inside?”

Too shocked to protest, Petunia opened the door a little wider, her movements almost frantic as she ushered her inside.

“Nice place you’ve got here.” Lily said as she glanced around the spacious townhouse. “Courtesy of the Order, I assume?”

“Ah, yes. They’ve been right decent to us.”

“No need to sound so surprised.”

“Yes, well...” Petunia trailed off, fumbling around the kitchen as she prepared a tray of tea and biscuits. “Vernon says it was the least they could’ve done, what with all the trouble we’ve had to put up with over the years.”

“He *really* doesn’t get it, does he?”

“What?”

Lily shook her head. “Nevermind.”

Petunia set down the tray, dropping heavily into a chair. Her hands were trembling, though she managed to pour two cups of tea, shoving one of them across the table.

“Are you really that shocked to see me? Severus told you I was alive.”

“Yes, but I didn’t believe him. Why would I? The whole thing sounded impossible, even by magical standards. I could’ve never guessed that...”

“So why did you give him the blood?”

Petunia shrugged. “On the off chance that he was telling the truth, I didn’t want it on my conscience.”

“Well,” Lily said, “I want to thank you for what you did. You gave me a second chance, which I’ll always be grateful for.”

“No need to thank me. Just... don’t mention it to anyone, all right?”

“If you insist.”

Petunia nodded, reaching for a biscuit. “His, I presume?”

“What?” Lily frowned before she glanced down at her stomach. “Oh, yes.”

“When are you due?”

“Two weeks from today.”

“Surprised it isn’t sooner. Sure you’re not having twins?”

“I’m *not* having twins,” Lily said irritably, rubbing at a sharp twinge in her back. “Though speaking of children, why don’t we talk about Harry?”

With that, any trace of civility disappeared. Petunia’s thin features twisted into a scowl, her voice icy. “What about him?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you? The way you treated him...”

“We fed that boy! Put clothes on his back, kept a roof over his head...”

“Did you show him the least bit of kindness? Did you ever, even for a *second*, make him feel loved? He was a *child*, Petunia! An innocent child, and you... you and that *despicable* husband of yours...”

Petunia rose to her feet, sending a teacup clattering to the ground. “We didn’t want to get mixed up in all that Wizarding business, but were we given a choice? No, we weren’t! We were forced to pay the price for *your*...”

“I didn’t *choose* to be a witch,” Lily interrupted, attempting to shift into a more comfortable position. “Nor did I choose to be related to you. I didn’t choose to have my life destroyed, losing both my husband and the ability to raise my son. I understand that it was an inconvenience to take Harry in, but *none* of us chose that. Blaming him for... he was a *baby*, Petunia. How could you...”

Petunia dropped back into her chair, her thin chest heaving rapidly. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to admit that you were wrong. I want you to apologize. I want you to realize that Harry was innocent, that it was *your* fault that...”

“There are a few things I could’ve done differently, I suppose, though I hardly see the point...”

Lily hesitated, taking a deep breath as she pressed a hand to her lower back. Mild discomfort had given way to nagging pain, though that might’ve had something to do with the hard wooden chair she was sitting in. She forced herself to relax, resisting the urge to cast a Cushioning Charm.

“You don’t see the point?” she said. “How do you think you’d feel in my situation?”

“Well, I’m not a witch, so I would never *be* in...”

“I’m not talking about magic, Petunia. Tragedy can happen to anyone, no matter how ‘normal’ their lives might be. What if you’d been the one who was unable to care for your baby due to an illness or an accident, or...”

“That’s hardly the same thing.”

“How is it different?”

Petunia sniffed. “Because *my* son would never be a danger to anyone who took him in. They wouldn’t have to worry about their world being turned upside down due to his presence in their home.”

“So in your eyes,” Lily said, “that makes it all right?”

“I’m merely saying that...”

“What if Dudley had been sick with some disease, one that might’ve complicated his caretakers’ lives? Would it have been right for them to reject him, to punish him for his illness?”



"Of course not. Some things simply can't be helped."

"Precisely." Lily fidgeted, wishing she could get up and walk around. As much as she'd wanted to confront Petunia, this conversation was doing nothing to help with her restlessness.

"Magic is not a disease." Petunia pointed out.

"No, it isn't, but it's also not something we choose. It doesn't make us evil or worthless, nor does it make us freaks. The fact that you can't see that is the real tragedy in all of this."

"What are you talking about?"

"I loved you, Tuney. I suppose a part of me always will. But you never cared, did you? You were too busy being jealous and spiteful, punishing me for something that couldn't be helped. All you could see were the differences between us, never bothering to look for the similarities. If you had, you would've understood what was truly important."

"What's that?"

"Compassion... acceptance... simple human kindness. Those things might sound ordinary, but they're so much more powerful than magic could ever be."

Petunia sat silent, her hand trembling as she crumbled a biscuit between her fingers.

"As for Harry... he would've loved you if you'd allowed it, given so much more than you believed he took from you. He has a forgiving heart, a gentle soul..."

"He wasn't all bad," Petunia said grudgingly. "I can admit that, especially after what he did for Dudley. But that's all in the past. Nothing I can do about it now."

"Yes, there is," Lily replied as she got to her feet. She pressed a hand to her back, biting her lip as she waited for the spasm to pass. "You can apologize for your mistakes. Try to learn from them and make sure they never happen again. If you can't do that for his sake, I hope you'll at least do it for yourself. Despite everything, I'd like to see you happy."

Petunia sniffed. "I *am* happy."

"No, Petunia," she said, leaving a slip of parchment on the table as she turned to leave. "You're not."

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After she left Petunia's, Lily decided to make a quick appearance at the Burrow. Her burst of energy was wearing off, but she felt a sudden, almost desperate need to see Harry. Did he know how much she loved him, how very sorry she was for everything he'd been through?

"Lily!" Molly exclaimed as she opened the door. "What a wonderful surprise!"

"It's nice to see you, too. May I come in?"

Taking her by the arm, Molly ushered her inside, offering her a chair that looked much more comfortable than the one at Petunia's. She accepted it gratefully, trying not to grimace as she felt another cramp in her lower back. Was it her imagination, or was it stronger than the last one?

“Tea?”

“Just a bit of water, please.”

“How are you feeling?” Molly said, humming as she bustled around the kitchen. “Frankly, I’m surprised you’re still out and about. Those last few weeks are miserable.”

“They have been,” she agreed. “Though I’m feeling a bit better today.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Lily nodded, even as she noticed something unusual. The house was completely silent, no sound to be heard other than the clinking of glasses.

“Where is everyone?”

“Ginny’s taking a nap,” Molly said as she settled herself at the table. “Arthur’s at work, and Harry’s taken Ron and Hermione to Diagon Alley to look over a few textbooks. Not sure how long they’ll be, but I think they were planning on visiting the twins as well.”

“Textbooks?” Lily frowned. “I thought he wasn’t going back for his seventh year.”

“He didn’t tell you? Minerva’s offered him the Defense Against the Dark Arts position.”

“She wants him to be a *professor*? But he’s only 18!”

Molly shrugged. “With more experience than wizards three times his age. Besides, Severus wasn’t much older when he started teaching.”

“I know, but...” Lily paused, pressing a hand to her stomach. “Is that really what he wants? I thought he was going to be an Auror.”

“I don’t think he wants to go off for three years of training now that you’re around, especially with a new sibling on the way. And with you and Severus going back to Hogwarts...”

“Shit.”

The contraction hit her hard, a jolt of intense pressure slamming into her back and shuddering around to her midsection. Moaning softly, she squeezed her eyes shut, gritting her teeth until the pain subsided. She sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes widening as she stared down at the puddle on the floor.

“I... I think I’m in labor.”

Molly chuckled. “I can see that. Let’s get you upstairs.”

“I’m supposed to go to St. Mungo’s. Severus thinks it would be better if...”

“No offense, dear, but I don’t give a toss what Severus thinks. I only delivered one of mine at that blasted hospital, and let me tell you, it was the worst labor I ever had.”

“Why?”

“All sorts of strangers poking and prodding at me, barking orders left and right.” Molly shook her head. “Couldn’t get them to leave me alone, even when I threatened to hex their bollocks off.”

Unable to help herself, Lily laughed. “Which one was that?”

“Bill. Had the rest of them right here at home.”

“Yeah, that’s what I did with Harry. It wasn’t easy, but...”

Lily groaned, using one hand to brace herself against the wall. This contraction was definitely stronger than the last one, threatening to bring her to her knees as she rode out the waves of pain. But then just as suddenly, it was over, her muscles relaxing as she let out a shaky sigh.

“God, that hurt.”

“Hmmm,” Molly said. “you’re further along than I thought.”

“Really?”

“I’ll have to check to be sure, but there wasn’t much time between that contraction and the last one. If you still want to go to St. Mungo’s...”

She hesitated, giving her head a little shake. “I think I’ll stay here. I mean, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. Let’s get you settled.”

They made it to the bedroom, where a soft pair of hands helped her out of her robes. Carefully, she eased herself onto the bed, forgetting to be self-conscious as she opened herself up for inspection.

“6 cm,” Molly announced a few seconds later, tucking her wand back in her sleeve.

“Six?!”

“It’s your second. Tends to go a lot quicker than the first.”

“I need to get a message to Severus. He doesn’t know where...”

She trailed off, her hands clutching the sheets as another contraction tore through her. Unable to help herself, she let out a shuddering moan, opening her eyes to find Ginny standing at the door.

“Mum?” she said, staring at them with wide eyes. “What’s going on?”

“Lily’s in labor. Nothing to be alarmed about. Are the others home?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Tell them there’s no need to worry. She’s doing fine.”

“That’s debatable,” Lily grumbled, reaching up to wipe the sweat from her forehead. “Why is it so hot?”

“Well, it *is* August, dear.”

“Right. God forbid I have any of my babies in winter.”

Smiling, Molly cast a cooling charm before she turned back to her daughter. “Let the boys know what’s happening,” she said, “and then I want you to go to the Floo and call Severus.

Tell him that he's got a wee one on the way, so he'd better get over here."

Ginny nodded, closing the door behind her as she left the room.

"Bloody hell..."

This time, Lily didn't even try to keep quiet. She cried out so loud she startled herself, cursing vehemently as her fists curled into the sheets.

"Damn," she said when the contraction ended. "Do you think we should cast a Muffliato?"

"Certainly not. It'll give those boys something to think about the next time they go out looking for a shag."

"Fair enough."

"Here, let me have another look." Molly knelt between her knees, probing her gently before she cast the charm again. "7 cm. You're heading into transition now, so you might want to start thinking about positions."

"Positions?" Lily frowned.

"Yes, for pushing."

"Shouldn't I be lying like this?"

Molly shrugged. "If it works for you, that's fine, though it isn't necessary. I switched it up with most of my labors."

"Which was the easiest?"

"Ginny. I had her when I was lying on my side. Thought I was in the early stages, kept trying to go back to sleep. The next thing I knew, her little head was popping out. Easy as you please."

"Easy," Lily repeated, gasping as she braced herself for the next contraction. It seemed twice as strong as the last one, the pressure so intense that she started to cry.

"The others," she said a minute later, her breath hitching in her throat. "What about them?"

Molly murmured sympathetically, lifting her wand to cast another cooling charm. "Had Bill when I was laid up on my back in St. Mungo's. Already told you that. As for Charlie, I delivered him while I was on my hands and knees. Seemed to help with the pressure."

"I had no idea you could do it that way."

"Sure you can," Molly said. "Worked for Percy, too. The twins... well, I honestly don't remember. I know I was in the bathroom, but..."

"How about Ron?"

Molly smiled. "I had him while I was sitting in my favorite chair."

"Was that..."

Lily managed to shift to her hands and knees, arching her back as another contraction shuddered through her. When it finally ended, she sank back on her heels, panting hard as she

glared at Molly.

"That's not... very comfortable."

"You're in transition now. It's bound to hurt, no matter *what* position you're in."

"It's so hot."

"I know," Molly said, picking up the bowl she'd transfigured. She filled it with cool water, using a damp cloth to wipe the sweat from Lily's skin.

"Mum?" Ginny called, peering at them through a crack in the door.

"What is it, dear? Did you reach him?"

"I couldn't get him by Floo. Harry's gone to fetch him though."

"Harry?" Lily said. "Did he Appara..."

The next contraction slammed into her without warning, seeming to crush her insides with its powerful grip. She hunched forward with a pitiful moan, one arm supporting her massive stomach as she used the other to brace herself against the bedpost.

"To answer your question," Molly said when the contraction finally subsided. "Yes, Harry Apparated. Shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

"Thank god."

"Do you want something for the pain? I'm afraid I don't have anything on hand, but I could send one of the boys..."

"No, I... I think I can manage."

Molly nodded. "Well, it shouldn't take too much longer. Would you like me to check you again?"

"Please."

"Hmmm. Going even quicker than I thought."

"How long before I have to start..." Lily trailed off as her stomach tightened, heaving with a series of powerful contractions. Her cries were mingled with grunts now, the urge to push growing stronger by the second.

"Almost 9 cm," Molly said as her body went slack. "Won't be long now."

"Could I move over to the chair?"

"Yes, though we better make it quick." Sliding an arm around her waist, Molly helped her to her feet, guiding her across the room to the armchair. She sighed in relief as she slumped against the cushioned backrest, though she only had a few seconds to rest before she lurched forward with an agonized groan.

"Where's Severus?" she whispered when the contraction was over. "Why isn't he here?"

"I don't know, dear. Shall I go downstairs and check?"

"No," she said hastily. "Don't leave me."

Soothing hands gathered the damp hair off her neck, twisting it into a knot as her body seized up again. And then there was nothing but pain, blinding in its intensity, contractions hitting her so fast and hard that she could no longer tell them apart. All the while, Molly was a comforting presence, wiping the sweat from her forehead as she splashed cool water into her mouth.

“A-Accio,” Lily rasped, shivering violently as her head fell back against the chair. “Accio wand.”

Her fingers closed around it like a lifeline, twirling it in a familiar motion.

“*Expecto... Patronum.*”

The doe sprang forth, slender and graceful, staring at her with soft, inquisitive eyes.

“Find Severus,” she said, gasping as she dug her fingers into the armrest. “Tell him... I need him. Now.”

“Lily? I’m sorry, but it’s time to push.”

“I can’t,” she whimpered, though even as she said it, she knew she didn’t have a choice. Her body forced her to bear down, something shifting deep inside her as the baby began to make its descent. She pushed hard, once and then again, bursting into tears as the contraction finally ended.

“He’s not... going to... make it.”

But then she heard a muffled curse, followed by heavy footfalls on the stairs. The door burst open and there he was, his eyes wild with panic as he stared at the empty bed.

“*Where the bloody hell...*”

“Over here, Severus,” Molly said quietly. “You made it just in time.”

## 91. Family, Present and Future

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### Chapter 91: Family, Present and Future

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Severus's breath caught in his throat as his eyes fell on Lily. She was seated in an armchair, panting softly as she pressed a hand to her stomach. Her hair was damp with sweat, loose strands clinging to her face, which was pale with fatigue. Her eyes... bloody hell, her eyes were the most jarring part. They were dull with pain, puffy from weeping, making it clear how much she'd already suffered.

"Severus," she whispered, her voice so hoarse that he hardly recognized it as hers. "Where the hell have you been?"

He crossed the room in a few quick strides, dropping to his knees beside the chair. The next thing he knew, she was in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder as she sniffled in his ear.

"I was at Petunia's when your Patronus found me," he said quietly. "When you didn't show up for dinner..."

"Oh god."

She pushed him away, her mouth twisting into a grimace. Groaning low in her throat, she leaned forward, drawing his attention to her stomach as it tightened with each contraction. Only then did he notice the smears of blood on her thighs, followed by the small, dark stain on the carpet.

"Is that normal?" he muttered.

Fortunately, Lily didn't seem to hear him, her eyes still closed as she slumped against the chair. Molly knelt between her thighs, examining her briefly before she nodded in satisfaction.

"Perfectly normal, as long as it's not too much."

"And when does it qualify as..." He hesitated, pitching his voice a little lower. "How do you know if it's too much?"

Molly shrugged. "You just know."

"That's hardly helpful."

"Try not to worry, Severus. She's doing fine."

"She is *not* fine!" he snapped. "Look at her!"

As if on cue, Lily braced herself for the next contraction, tears streaming from beneath her tightly closed lids. Her whimpers were mingled with pitiful grunts, her muscles trembling with exertion as she struggled to push the baby out.

“Good, Lily,” Molly said. “That’s good. Can you try for one more?”

She moaned, shaking her head as her body went slack.

“Isn’t there *something* we can do?” Severus said under his breath.

“Relax. It’s almost over.”

“How much longer?”

Molly sighed. “Maybe an hour, give or take? One can never tell with these things.”

“An hour?!” He swallowed a cutting remark, realizing that it wouldn’t make any difference. ‘Very well,’ he said instead. “Just tell me what to do. If she needs something for the pain...”

“Water,” Lily whispered.

“Of course.” Withdrawing his wand, he shot a gentle stream into her mouth, waiting until she’d had her fill before he reached for his cloak. “I’ll be back shortly. I’m just going to...”

“No!” she said, her eyes wide with panic. “I don’t want any potions, just... shit...”

“So this is what I’m supposed to do?” he hissed, his own insides twisting as her body seized up again. “Just sit here and watch her suffer? I don’t like feeling useless, Molly. As a matter of fact, I despise it.”

“You can be here. That’s what she needs right now.”

“Hot,” Lily muttered when the contraction had passed. “So hot.”

“Right,” Molly said. “*There’s* something you can do.”

He nodded, accepting the bowl of water and cloth she handed him. Wiping the sweat from Lily’s face along with her neck, chest, and stomach, he even managed to clean the blood from her thighs before the next contraction hit.

“Bloody hell...”

This time, she screamed, a sound of pure anguish echoing off the walls. Gasping for breath, she bore down again and again, her legs quivering with the effort.

“One more,” Molly said. “Come on, Lily, you can do it.”

“I... can’t...” she panted, each word punctuated by a sob. “I can’t...”

But even as she said it, she managed one last push, cursing softly as she fell back against the chair.

“Look at that. You’re crowning.”

“What?”

“Crowning,” Molly repeated. “Feel for yourself.”

Lily leaned forward, wincing as she probed between her thighs. After a moment, she glanced up at Severus, surprising him with a ghost of a smile.



“Well,” she said quietly. “I hope you’re ready to be a father.”

He wasn’t so sure about that, though he was *certainly* ready for her suffering to be over. He started to think it would never end, the baby barely seeming to move as she grunted and sobbed through several more contractions. But then finally, she gasped, one hand gripping his arm as she used the other to brace herself against the chair.

“Push, Lily,” Molly said, watching her intently. “That’s right. Can you give me another one? Good, good. Now just one more...”

All of a sudden, time seemed to speed up, several things happening at once. A terrible scream gave way to a breathless little laugh, followed by a blur of motion as the infant was pulled from between Lily’s thighs. Severus stared at it in disbelief, too stunned to move or speak.

“Strong lungs,” Molly observed, placing it in Lily’s arms as it started to cry. “Seems healthy all over from what I can see, though we’ll want to perform a few diagnostics. Let me just take care of the cord here and we’ll get you both cleaned up.”

Severus barely heard her, all his attention fixed on Lily. Her head was bent so close to the infant’s that he couldn’t see their faces, her soft murmurs mingled with furious wails.

“Here,” Molly said after a moment. “Let me take her.”

“But...”

“Only for a minute. We want her warm and clean, don’t we? I’ll bring her right back, I promise.”

Lily sighed, shaking her head as she stared down at herself. “I’m a mess.”

On one hand, she had a point. There were dark smears all over her breasts and belly, the latter of which had deflated somewhat in the last few minutes. Her hair had come loose, matted with half dried sweat, her face ghostly pale other than the dark circles under her eyes. But she was smiling, her expression positively blissful as she looked up at him.

“You’re beautiful,” he said truthfully. “Though if you’d like me to cast a cleansing charm or two...”

She chuckled, her eyes flying to the door as it opened again.

“Just over 9 pounds,” Molly announced, “as big as she is healthy. I clocked the time of her birth at 12:06 AM.”

“August 11,” Lily said. “Isn’t it...”

“Ginny’s birthday. She’ll be thrilled.”

“You haven’t told them yet?”

“Oh, I will,” Molly said carelessly. “As soon as I get the three of you settled.”

With that, she turned her attention to Severus, looking at him expectantly. Feeling awkward, he held out his arms, accepting the tiny bundle.

“Just be careful with her head.”

He didn't need anyone to tell him that, his touch as light as a feather as he ran a finger over the baby's cheek. She was no longer crying, her eyes slightly dazed as they found his. Suddenly, he understood how Lily must feel when she locked eyes with Harry, the odd sensation of looking into a mirror. These eyes were as dark as his own, even bearing the same shape.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Lily said quietly.

Severus nodded, touching the pert little nose before he traced the shape of her mouth. To his relief, her other features were more like her mother's, pitch dark eyes nestled in a heart-shaped face. Her hair was darker than Lily's, yet lighter than his own, her head covered in tufts of rich auburn.

"Hello," he murmured, touching one of her hands. She made a soft noise in response, her tiny fingers curling around his.

With that, he fell in love, so mesmerized by his newborn daughter that he forgot anyone else was in the room. It was only when the baby began to fuss that he lifted his eyes, shooting a panicked glance at Lily.

"What did I do?"

To his surprise, she was clean and dressed, her hair freshly brushed and woven into a neat braid. Her eyes were fixed on him and the baby, full of so much love that he felt a lump in his throat.

"You didn't do anything, Severus. She's probably just hungry."

"Oh, no doubt," Molly said as she took the baby from his arms. "Help Lily to bed, will you? I'm sure she'd like to lie down."

Lily nodded, attempting to hide a grimace as she pushed herself to her feet. She wavered slightly, glancing up at Severus as he put an arm around her waist.

"I'm a bit... woozy."

"I can see that. Here, let me carry you."

"You don't have to..."

Before she could finish, he lifted her in his arms, as careful with her as he'd been with their daughter. He carried her to the bed, waiting for Molly to turn down the blankets before he settled her against the pillows.

"Thank you," she murmured as she unbuttoned her nightgown. Parting it to expose her breast, she reached for the baby, nestling her in the crook of her arm.

"Right," Molly said. "I better get downstairs and share the good news. Let me know if you need anything else, all right?"

Severus thanked Molly for her assistance, though in truth, he was glad to see her go. What they'd just been through had destroyed any concept of privacy, yet there was a different kind of intimacy to the scene that was now taking place. He didn't know why it affected him the way it did, but for the first time that evening, it was all he could do to maintain his

composure. He swallowed hard, utterly disarmed by Lily's peaceful expression as the infant began to suckle.

"What does it feel like?"

It was a stupid question, though she didn't seem to mind. She opened her eyes, smiling as the baby let out a soft sound of contentment.

"It feels... perfect."

With that, Severus understood why he felt the way he did. This was the most perfect moment he'd ever experienced, the first time in his life that there hadn't been some dark cloud hanging over his head. There was nothing to worry about, nothing to fear, no reason to believe that any of this would end in tragedy. All he saw was the beauty of the memory they were creating, while knowing there were many more to come.

"I'm so tired."

He nodded, flicking his wand at the armchair in the corner. "You've had a trying day."

She laughed. "That might be the biggest understatement I've ever heard."

"Shall I hold her while you sleep?"

"Do you want to?"

"Yes."

Feeling more sure of himself this time, he leaned over the bed, lifting the baby into his arms. She'd already fallen asleep, a warm, comforting weight against his chest as he settled himself in the chair. Lifting a hand to stifle a yawn, he watched Lily's eyes drift closed, nearly dozing off himself before he heard a soft tap at the door.

"Enter."

Harry pushed it open a few inches, peering at him through the crack. "Am I bothering..."

He shook his head, pressing a finger to his lips as he pointed at the bed. Seeming to understand, Harry crept closer, his words barely audible as he said, "Is she really all right?"

"Just tired. She'll need time to recover."

"And the baby?"

"See for yourself."

Harry leaned over the chair, his brow furrowed as he peered down at the little face. "She's so..."

"So *what*?" Severus might've made his peace with the boy, but he'd hex him into oblivion if he had the nerve to insult his daughter.

"She's very pretty. Like a little doll."

Relaxing, he nodded, folding back the blanket so Harry could have a better look. "She resembles your mother. Well, other than the eyes."

“Does she have a name yet?”

“We’re still undecided.”

“Harry should name her,” Lily mumbled from the bed.

“*Me?*”

Severus hesitated, equally surprised by the suggestion. Of course, it didn’t take him long to figure out what Lily was trying to do. He knew how important it was to her that Harry be included, how much she wanted him to feel like part of the family. Allowing him to name his baby sister? That seemed like a good place to start.

“You,” he agreed.

“All right then,” Harry said, still sounding stunned. “There’s one name I like. I saw it in a book the other day, but...”

“You mean to tell me you *read*? I would’ve never guessed.”

“Severus,” Lily said, her voice drowsy. “Don’t be an ass.”

“My apologies. Please, continue.”

Harry shrugged, seeming to relax now that the tension had been broken. “The name was Seraphina. I know it’s a little fancy, but I thought it might sound good with your last name. You know, same first letter and all.”

“Seraphina,” Severus repeated, lingering over each syllable. “Well, I don’t hate it. That said, it *is* quite a mouthful, especially for a baby.”

“Sera,” Lily said. “That’s the shortened version.”

“What do you think?” he asked her.

“I think it’s perfect, especially if we use that middle name you keep insisting on.”

“Lillian?”

“Yes. Seraphina Lillian Snape.”

As soon as she said it, Severus knew it was the right choice. There were echoes of them both in that name, something pleasant about the way it rolled off the tongue. Satisfied, he turned back to Harry, attempting to hide a smirk.

“Very well,” he said. “Seraphina it is. If she grows up to hate it, however, just remember that she’ll have no one to blame but you.”

“That’s all right, sir. She’ll still be able to blame you for everything else.”

“Touché.”

As if on cue, the baby stirred, nuzzling her face against Severus’s chest. Not finding what she was looking for, she started to fuss, her cries growing louder by the second.

“Give her here.” Lily shifted onto her side, unbuttoning her nightgown as Harry made a hasty exit.

“Is this normal?” Severus said after he’d left. “It’s only been a couple hours.”

She nodded, helping the baby latch onto her nipple. “That’s how often she needs to eat, at least for the first few weeks.”

“And when are you supposed to sleep?”

“Whenever I can.”

Severus shook his head, watching them both in consternation. He supposed he should be glad that his daughter had such a good appetite, but he couldn’t help his concern for Lily, still pale and exhausted in the aftermath of giving birth.

“How are you feeling?”

She shrugged. “Tired, sore. Nothing that isn’t to be expected. The first few weeks are rough — they were with Harry, too. It’ll get easier.”

“I hope so.”

“Severus?”

“Hmmm?”

“Have you thought about Hogwarts at all?”

“Honestly?” He sighed. “No. I’m supposed to give Minerva my answer in less than a week, but I’ve...”

“Had other things on your mind?”

He inclined his head. “To say the least.”

“Do you think...” She hesitated, switching the baby to her other breast. “Would you *want* to go back?”

Severus closed his eyes, overwhelmed by a swirl of conflicted feelings. There’d been times in his life that Hogwarts had felt like a prison, a bleak, oppressive reality from which there was no escape. And yet there were other times when it had seemed more like a refuge, the only true home he’d ever known. At Hogwarts, he’d experienced destruction and salvation in equal measures, had nearly lost his life even as he’d discovered that he’d had everything to live for.

“Irrelevant,” he said. “Even if I wished to return, which is debatable, this would hardly be the time.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’m not leaving you behind, Lily, especially with a newborn.”

“We couldn’t come with you?”

“You need time to recover, not to mention that the baby...”

“Sera.”

“Sera,” he repeated, “will only be three weeks old when term starts. I hardly think it would be wise to expose her to hundreds of other children at such a young age, what with all the contagions they carry. You wouldn’t want her to fall ill, would you?”

“Of course not, but...”

“No,” he agreed. “Which means you’d be shut up in our quarters, your days and nights spent in solitude. You remember what that entails, Lily, what little time I had to spare when I served as headmaster. Is that truly a life you wish to return to?”

“I could always...”

“What?” he interrupted. “Raise this child by yourself while I work from dawn until midnight for an income we don’t even need?” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t do that to you. Not in a million years.”

To his horror, she burst into tears, startling the baby who began to cry as well. Only then did he realize that she must’ve had her own reasons for asking, which he hadn’t bothered to consider. True, he was trying to do what was best for them all, but he could hardly make such a major decision without taking her feelings into account.

“Lily,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean...”

“No, you’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Sighing, he leaned over the bed, taking the baby from her arms. He stroked her little back with the tips of his fingers, surprised when she immediately grew quiet.

“You’re good at that.”

He shrugged, nestling Sera in the crook of his arm as he returned to his chair. “Why do you want to return to Hogwarts?”

“I don’t. It was just an idea.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

She hesitated, her eyes fixed on the wall behind him. “It’s just that Harry’s probably going to be working there.”

“Defense Against the Dark Arts?” he asked, though of course, he already knew the answer.

“I know he’s a little young to be teaching, but...”

“So was I.”

“That’s true. He’s old enough to take care of himself, just like you were. He doesn’t need...” She trailed off, obviously struggling for composure. “I’d just like to be able to see him regularly, and I... I think he wants that, too. He thinks we’re going back, you see, and...”

“I *do* see,” he interrupted. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I just found out this afternoon.”

He nodded, glancing down at the baby before he lifted his eyes to Lily again. They both seemed incredibly fragile, so much that he didn’t trust himself to make *any* decision on their

behalf. What he needed was...

"Severus?"

Time. That was what he needed. Time to rest, to think, to consider all factors. The idea of returning to Hogwarts...

"Get some sleep," he said quietly. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Clearly, she was too exhausted to argue, closing her eyes as he covered her with a flick of his wand. He extinguished the last remaining candle, resting his head against the back of the chair.

Hogwarts...

In truth, he was *afraid* to go back. It had only been three months, yet he felt like a different person, no longer plagued with bitterness and resentment. He wanted to believe he was free from that now, no matter *where* he chose to live. But was it really that simple?

Perhaps it was a foolish question. After all, his decision had already been made. But for Lily's sake, for the sake of their child, he needed to be sure that his past wouldn't come back to haunt him.

With that, he turned his thoughts to Harry, mulling over what Lily had told him. So the boy was going to be a professor, was he? Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, no less. Severus waited to feel some negative emotion, thinking back over all the times he'd been rejected for the position. But there was no stab of resentment, no sharp edge of envy. Even when he remembered that the job was being handed to Harry on a silver platter, he felt nothing.

Well, no, that wasn't true. What he felt was a deep sense of peace, realizing that after all these years, he'd finally conquered his demons.

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Severus didn't even attempt to sleep, still lost in thought as the first rays of sunlight slanted across the room. Only when Sera started to whimper did he rise from his chair, laying her gently on the bed.

"Where are you going?" Lily mumbled, reaching up to fumble with her nightgown. She pushed it down over her shoulder, her eyes still closed as the baby began to suckle.

"Home. Thought I'd grab us some clean clothes, maybe take a shower. Can I bring you anything?"

"Food."

He nodded, leaning over to kiss her on the forehead. "Molly will take care of that, I'm sure. I'll be back in a couple hours."

Thankfully, Molly was the only one in the kitchen, her expression sympathetic as she handed him a cup of coffee. He grunted, lifting it to his lips as he spotted the platters on the table.

“Hungry?” she said, following the direction of his eyes.

“Not me. Lily.”

“Of course! I’ll take something up to her.” Filling a plate with enough food for several people, she placed it on a tray along with a large glass of pumpkin juice. “Help yourself to more coffee, Severus, along with whatever else you’d like.”

“Thank you.”

He was on his third cup when Harry sauntered into the room. His hair was even messier than usual, his eyes bleary as he stifled a yawn. Picking up a piece of bacon, he popped it in his mouth, jumping as he spotted the tall, black clad figure at the other end of the table.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter,” Severus said, unable to resist a smirk. “I was hoping I might have a word with you.”

---

Hogwarts was strangely silent, like a slumbering beast beneath the stifling August heat. Severus didn’t see another soul as he and Harry walked through the halls — even the portraits were deeply asleep. But as they ascended the stairs to the Headmaster’s office, the door swung open before they could reach it. Minerva smiled at them both, congratulating Severus on the birth of his child.

“How did you...” Trailing off, he rolled his eyes. “Molly. I’m surprised she didn’t take out an ad in the *Daily Prophet*.”

“You might want to check the evening edition.”

Shaking his head, he accepted the seat she offered, shooting a glance at the portrait. Dumbledore appeared to be sleeping, his chin resting against his long white beard.

“Now,” Minerva said as she settled herself behind the desk. “What can I do for you two?”

Harry cleared his throat. “I’ll take the job. I mean, if you’re still offering.”

“Of course we are. We’d be delighted to have you... that is, if Headmaster Snape approves.”

“I approve,” Severus said, “though I have no wish to be headmaster.”

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “No?”

“It’s a demanding job, one that leaves little time for anything else. I have other priorities these days.”

“Well, I’m sure accommodations could be made for...”

He held up a hand to stop her. “Priorities aside, it’s not a position I particularly enjoy.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Minerva said, obviously trying to hide her relief. “What will you be doing instead?”

“That depends.”



“On what?”

“You.”

She hesitated, giving him a thoughtful look. “If you’d like to go back to teaching Potions...”

“I would,” he interrupted, “though I will not be able to do so at the start of this term. I intend to take a year off to help Lily with our daughter.”

“Hmmm. Well, I’ve already persuaded Horace to stay for one more year. If you still want the job after that, it’s yours.”

“Will Lily and the child be permitted to join me?”

She shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Hogwarts was built to accommodate staff *and* their families, after all.”

“That’s what I thought, though I’ve never seen...”

“Well, you wouldn’t have, would you? For the past couple generations, none of our professors have had young children. It was different when I was a student — my Divination professor had seven of them, all living under this roof.”

“Seven?” Harry said, his eyes wide.

Minerva nodded. “She had a baby every year that I was here. Her quarters kept expanding to accommodate them, adding another bedroom whenever she had a need for it.”

“Like the Room of Requirement?”

“Precisely.”

“No need for that,” Severus said hastily. “We won’t be having any more children.”

Minerva poured him a cup of tea, her lips twitching. “Are you sure? Lily *does* seem to enjoy...”

“Yes, well, you didn’t see her last night. I sincerely doubt she’ll want to go through that again.”

“That’s what Arthur Weasley said, right after Bill was born.”

“If this is your idea of a joke, Minerva...”

“Um,” Harry interrupted, “can we just talk about the sibling I already have?”

“Of course,” Severus said, grateful for the reprieve.

“I was wondering... that is, I wanted to know if...”

“Time off,” he interjected, realizing that Harry was too flustered to continue. “He’d like to visit his mother and sister every other weekend, at least until they’re able to join him here at Hogwarts.”

“Right. I wouldn’t ask, but I’ve only just gotten my mum back. And Sera... well, I’m the only big brother she’s got. I don’t want to be a stranger to her, you know?”

“Of course.” Minerva conjured a handkerchief, using it to dab at her eyes. “Feel free to take as many weekends as you please. Holidays, too.”

“Thanks, Professor McGonagall.”

“Harry, you’re a professor yourself now. Please, feel free to call me Minerva.”

She dismissed them soon thereafter, handing Harry a sack of paperwork for the upcoming school year. Reaching for one of the sheaves of parchment, Severus unrolled it, examining the empty syllabus.

“I can’t believe there are *seven* of those,” Harry said, shaking his head as he headed toward the front gate. “How am I supposed to...”

“I still have plenty of notes from my classes if you’d like to take a look.”

“Really?”

Severus shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Unless, of course, you’d rather consult Gilderoy Lockhart’s impressive volume of work.”

“Um, no thanks.”

Chuckling, he stopped as they reached the Apparition point. “Do you want to tell your mother about our plans, or shall I?”

“Why don’t we both do it?”

He nodded. “I suppose that would work.”

“Do you think she’ll be happy?”

Harry’s eyes met his, soft and full of hope, a perfect reflection of his mother’s that had nothing to do with shape or color. With that, Severus knew he’d made the right decision... just as he knew that this boy he’d once hated had somehow grown into a man he was learning to love.

“Yes,” he said, rather more gruffly than he’d intended. “I do.”

## 92. Always (Epilogue)

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### Chapter 92: “Always” (Epilogue)

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“Sera...” Lily sighed in exasperation as the baby squirmed out of her arms. “Can’t you be still for *one* second?”

“Apparently not,” Severus said, sounding faintly amused.

Scowling in a perfect imitation of her father, Sera pulled off the tiny robe, clad in nothing but a diaper as she plopped down on the floor.

“We’re leaving in half an hour. She’s got to get dressed.”

“I know.”

Shutting the lid of his trunk, he scooped up the baby with one arm as he grabbed the robe with the other. Sinking into the closest chair, he bent his head close to Sera’s, murmuring something that was too low for Lily to overhear. A moment later, he stood up, presenting her with a fully dressed child.

“How do you *do* that?”

“I have no idea.”

She shook her head, pretending not to notice his smug expression as she finished packing her things.

“You talked to Minerva?”

“Yes,” Severus said, flicking his wand to summon his cloak.

“And you’re sure she’s okay with it?”

“She’s thrilled.”

He’d never said so, but Lily had known Severus was reluctant to return to a full-time teaching position. His mood had grown darker whenever she’d mentioned it, his eyes straying to Sera before he’d quickly changed the subject.

“Severus,” she’d said one night, smiling as a shower of sparks erupted from the tip of his wand. “I’ve been thinking...”

He’d hesitated, distracted by the baby as she’d squealed in delight. “Yes?”

“You don’t have to teach *all* the classes, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. "Maybe we could share the position. I could take over with the younger students, and you could handle the older ones. You prefer teaching them anyway, don't you?"

"I do, but..."

"If we did it that way, we'd both have plenty of time to spend with Sera. And since we'd never have to work at the same time, one of us would always be available to take care of her."

"Hmmm," he said, his expression thoughtful. "I'll admit that the idea is appealing. Do you really want to teach though? It can be a frustrating job."

"You don't think I could handle it?"

"Quite the contrary. You're adept with potions, and you're certainly good with people. Far better than I am, in fact. I just don't want you to feel like you have to do it for my sake."

"Severus, I spent almost half my life cut off from the world. I've never even had a job, let alone one where I could make use of my talents. As much as I love being a mother, I'd like to experience other things, too."

"I see." He leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on hers. "Well, if this is truly what you want..."

"It is."

"I'll send Minerva an owl in the morning."

Coming back to the present, Lily lifted Sera into her arms, watching Severus gather the last of their things. He shrunk them down and stuffed them in his pockets, heading upstairs to extinguish the lights.

As she waited, she took a final look at their little cottage, unable to believe they were leaving so soon. The last year seemed to have flown by, full of significant moments that still made her smile.

Most of those had involved Sera, of course, from the day she'd learned to crawl to her first tottering footsteps. But there'd been other moments, too, bringing a sense of closure to their difficult past as they'd turned their eyes to the future.

*Dear Severus,*

*We'd like to express our deepest gratitude for all your assistance. Your testimony at our trial was invaluable, though that pales in comparison to the protection you offered our son. Your service to our family will never be forgotten, just as your friendship will always be valued. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you ever find yourself in need. In the meantime, we wish you all the best.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy*

*PS: Congratulations on the birth of your child.*

Lily had even received a holiday card from Petunia, wishing both her and Severus good tidings for the year to come. Granted, she didn't think they'd be getting together for tea anytime soon, but... well, it was a start.

Of course, her happiest memories were of the family she'd created for herself. Harry had spent the past year at Hogwarts, but he'd visited most weekends, eager to spend time with his mum and baby sister. He'd even grown more comfortable with Severus, often seeking his advice as he'd adjusted to his new position.

"Shall we take this?"

Spotting the toy broomstick in Severus's hand, Lily couldn't help but chuckle. Harry had given it to Sera for her first birthday, his eyes bright with excitement as he'd shown her how to mount it. To his dismay, she'd lost interest soon thereafter, returning her attention to the books she'd received from Severus.

"She can't even read," he'd said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Shrugging, Severus had settled his daughter in his lap, murmuring softly as they'd flipped through the pages together. Both of their brows had been furrowed, two pairs of dark eyes narrowing in concentration.

"Take it," Lily said, returning to the present. "Who knows? She might change her mind."

Of course, that didn't seem likely. Sera was too much like her father, already showing an interest in the things he preferred. She was as active as any child her age, but there was nothing she loved better than exercising her mind, playing with the puzzles he bought her or listening to him read aloud.

"She's a genius," Severus often said, sounding so casual that he might've been remarking on the weather. Personally, Lily thought it was far too early to tell, though there was no denying that their child was unusually bright.

"Ready?"

Lily blinked, smiling up at Severus as he put an arm around her waist.

"Yes. Let's go."

---

Harry was the first to greet them when they arrived at Hogwarts, chattering pleasantly as he directed them to their new quarters. Lily hadn't been enthused about staying in the dungeons, but the rooms were warm and dry, the furniture far more comfortable than she might've expected.

Severus frowned, poking his head into the bathroom and study before he inspected the bedrooms.

"A bit small," he said, "but adequate."

Lily carried Sera into the nursery, which had been furnished with an antique crib, wardrobe, and changing table. Settling herself in the rocking chair that had been placed in one corner, she opened her robe, leaving him to unpack as she offered the baby her breast.

"Should we take her to the feast?"

Pausing in the doorway, he gave her a thoughtful look. "As long as she has a nap first, she should behave well enough. If not, I can always bring her back down here."

"And miss the Sorting Ceremony?"

"If I'm lucky," he said with a smirk.

---

As it turned out, luck wasn't on Severus's side that night. Sera was captivated from the minute they entered the Great Hall, her dark eyes wide as she stared up at the enchanted ceiling. The only thing that seemed to interest her more were the people, especially those who dared to approach her while she was nestled in Severus's arms. She beamed up at them, babbling contentedly in response to whatever they said.

Bemused, Severus watched her eyes light up as the Sorting Ceremony began. She clapped her tiny hands for each and every student, clearly disappointed when the ritual finally came to an end.

In one way, his daughter was his polar opposite. She loved being in the middle of a crowd, seeming to thrive on the attention she received. But was that such a bad thing? Severus knew that her sociable nature would make her life easier, even as he realized that bringing her to Hogwarts had been the right decision.

"Arry! Arry!"

Surrendering Sera to her brother, he turned his attention to Lily, only to realize that she was deep in conversation with Minerva and Charity. He did his best to ignore the person who was seated on his other side, though unfortunately, there was no avoiding the overly large hand that was placed on his shoulder.

"Erm, Snape? Jus' wanted to say that it's good to see yeh back."

"Thank you, Hagrid."

"Was also wantin' to apologize fer..."

"That really isn't necessary," Severus interrupted, though he knew it was pointless. This wasn't the first apology he'd had to suffer through, nor was it likely to be the last. His only consolation was that sooner or later, guilty consciences would be soothed and everything would return to normal.

Normal... he nearly chuckled at the thought, realizing that the word had lost all meaning. This new tenure at Hogwarts was bound to be quite different than the last, worlds apart from the reality he'd once known. No bitterness, no fear, no hatred or isolation. Voldemort was gone, along with Dumbledore, taking with them every reason he'd ever had to feel miserable in this place.

The truth was, he hadn't only returned to Hogwarts for Lily's sake. Granted, she'd given him a good excuse, but he'd felt something deeper pulling him back. He'd always hungered for second chances, after all, needing to prove that he'd learned from past mistakes.

He could be a better man. He'd already proven that, thanks in no small part to Lily. He could be a good father, too, breaking the cycle of abuse he'd known as a child. He could even learn to love those he'd once hated, a lesson he'd taken from Harry Potter himself. But did it have to stop there? What if he could also be a better teacher, a better colleague, a better friend?

Perhaps it was greedy, this insatiable craving for redemption. But as he gazed at Lily, his eyes dropping to the child who'd fallen asleep in her lap, he knew he didn't want that redemption for his own sake. More than anything, he just wanted to be a man they could be proud of, worthy of their love and admiration.

"Severus?"

He returned his attention to Lily, taking Sera from her arms as she rose from her chair. Nodding respectfully at the other staff members, he put an arm around her waist as he led her from the hall.

---

Sharing the job of Potions professor turned out to be an ideal arrangement. Lily loved teaching, finding it easy to be patient and caring with her students. Perhaps she was too lenient, especially when it came to taking House Points or handing out detentions. But even Severus had to admit that her methods were effective, nodding in approval whenever he looked over her test scores.

For his part, Lily knew that some things would never change. He'd always be strict, prone to losing his patience over late homework or exploding cauldrons. But he'd learned not to belittle his students, while showing more restraint in his disciplinary measures. As a result, even the Gryffindors responded more positively to his high expectations, rewarded as much as any other student for their efforts.

Meanwhile, they both had plenty of time to spend with Sera, who'd quickly become a favorite around the castle. This, Lily suspected, was why so many people had softened toward Severus. It was impossible to think of him as cold or unfeeling when he was with his daughter, feeding her from his own plate or matching his long strides to her toddling footsteps.

Before Lily knew it, December had passed, followed by both their birthdays. As Valentine's Day approached, the school was decked out in pink, a tradition that had been carried over from Dumbledore's time as headmaster.

"Hideous," Severus grumbled as they passed through the halls. "I thought Minerva had better taste."

"It isn't so bad."

He snorted. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that Dolores Umbridge had exploded in here."

"Sera likes it. Do you think *she* has bad taste?"

"Sera," he said, "is 18 months old. One can certainly make an exception for her."

“Do you think she’ll be all right without us?”

“It’s only for one night.”

“And all of tomorrow.” Lily stopped in her tracks, realizing they’d made it to the front entrance. “What if something goes wrong?”

“Then someone will send a Patronus. In the meantime, she’ll have immediate access to a skilled healer, not to mention your son, who is well aware that I’ll kill him if anything happens to her.”

“Oh, no. Did you threaten him?”

Severus shrugged. “He wasn’t offended.”

“I just don’t know if we should...”

“Lily...” Turning to face her, he sighed. “If you can’t put your worries aside, at least for tonight, then there’s no point in going. That said, I’d really like to spend a little time alone with you. It seems like forever since...”

“I know.”

Taking his hand, she resumed walking, leading him to the Apparition point. A slow circle and the world shifted, leaving them standing in the living room of their cottage.

“It’s so quiet,” she whispered.

“Well,” he said as he removed both their cloaks, “we’ve been living with hundreds of children for months.”

“True.”

“Shall I make tea?”

She nearly laughed, realizing that tea was the last thing he wanted. Despite his good manners, there was no mistaking the hunger in his eyes as they swept over her body, even as he lifted his wand to summon the teapot.

“Tea would be lovely,” she said. “Let me just go up and change.”

Not waiting for a response, she hurried up the stairs, shutting herself in the bathroom. Discarding her robes, she slipped into the lingerie she’d transfigured, turning this way and that as she inspected herself in the mirror. The lacy red chemise left little to the imagination, sheer fabric hugging her curves in all the right places. Her breasts looked particularly inviting, round and full as they strained against the low neckline.

Satisfied, she put on a touch of perfume, tousling her hair before she applied a little makeup.

“Lily?”

She blushed at the sound of his voice, which seemed like a ridiculous reaction. They’d been together countless times, after all, having made love as recently as...



Shaking her head, she realized she couldn't remember. Two weeks ago? Three? Sex had been more infrequent since Sera's birth, their bed often shared by three rather than two. When it did happen, it was a hasty affair, both of them desperate to finish before the next feeding or dirty diaper.

To Severus's credit, he hadn't complained, though that only made her feel worse. She hadn't realized how much she'd been neglecting their relationship, promising herself that she'd make it up to him.

"Severus."

Turning around, he nearly dropped the tray he was holding.

"Put that down."

He obeyed without hesitation, though she quickly realized he had no intention of letting her be in charge. His eyes were smoldering as he stalked toward her, his kisses almost brutal in their urgency as he pushed her onto the bed. The chemise was discarded, along with her underwear, his mouth hot as it traveled down the length of her body. Before she knew it, his hips were cradled between her thighs, his forehead pressed against hers as he pushed himself inside her.

"Fuck..."

It didn't last long. Not the first time. His thrusts were too quick, too fierce, leaving them both gasping from the intensity as he collapsed in her arms.

"I think I'll have some tea now," she said a few minutes later, not bothering to dress as she rose from the bed. She could feel him watching as she fixed them both a cup, his eyes full of admiration when she turned to face him again.

"You're beautiful."

"Thank you," she said, handing him a cup as she slipped into bed beside him. "You're not so bad yourself."

He snorted. "Don't be ridiculous."

The truth was, Severus had never looked better, whether he realized it or not. There were no more dark circles under his eyes, his face no longer pale with fatigue. His skin would always be fair, of course, but the color was more natural now, helped by the hours he spent walking outdoors with their daughter. Even his hair looked healthy, soft and freshly washed as it brushed against his shoulders.

As for the rest of him... Lily ran a hand over his chest, bringing it to rest on his stomach. There was nothing skeletal about his appearance now, his body still slender yet obviously well-nourished. She admired the lean muscles of his abdomen, trailing her fingers up the inside of his thigh before she wrapped them around his growing erection.

"Forget the damn tea," he muttered, setting both their cups on the bedside table.

Stroking him gently, she ran her tongue along his length, drawing him into her mouth for several minutes before she rose to straddle his hips. By then, he was panting, his eyes fluttering closed as she reached between their bodies to position him at her entrance.

“Severus,” she whispered. “Look at me.”

Moaning softly, she took him into her an inch at a time, her movements slow and sensuous as she began to move.

This was a different kind of intensity, his eyes never leaving hers as his hands skimmed over her body, caressing her breasts, her hips, his fingers delving between her thighs as she whimpered in encouragement. He knew exactly how to touch her, slow, rhythmic circles gradually picking up momentum, her body trembling as he increased the friction.

“Oh god...”

Burying his other hand in her hair, he urged her to lean forward, pressing his mouth to hers. She came as soon as their lips met, even as he did, stealing his breath with a sharp gasp as she felt him pulsing inside her. It seemed to go on forever, a low groan emerging from deep in his chest in response to her shuddering moans.

“Tea?” he mumbled a few minutes later, his voice thick with drowsiness.

Unable to help herself, she laughed. “No, thank you.”

She fell asleep soon thereafter, awakening to find him newly aroused as bright sunlight slanted across the bed. Letting him have his way with her one last time, she was utterly sated as she got up to take a shower.

“May I join you?”

Somehow, that was the best part of all, his arms wrapping around her as the warm water cascaded over them both. He washed her from head to toe before she returned the favor, their hands entwined as they went down to make breakfast.

The rest of the day was positively blissful, an exchange of gifts followed by hours of quiet conversation as they walked in the garden. Lily had never felt closer to him, promising herself that they’d find time to be alone a little more often.

That might’ve been a perfect plan... if either of them had remembered to cast the charm.

---

Severus couldn’t take his eyes off Lily, standing on the hilltop in a flowing white dress. Her hair was woven through with flowers, her eyes sparkling as they met his. Smiling, she laid a hand on his arm, the other resting on her stomach.

“I thought you wanted to get married before your condition became too obvious.”

“Are you saying I look...” She trailed off, glancing down at her hand. “Oh, I didn’t even realize.”

She was four months pregnant, her belly just a slight curve beneath the layers of fabric. She’d told him right before Easter, obviously as shocked as he was. In the end though, it hadn’t mattered. She’d embraced her condition, making it clear that in *her* eyes, at least, this baby was as welcome as their first.

“Do you remember what that entails?” he’d asked her. “What you went through the last time you bore a child? Is that truly an experience you’d like to repeat?”

She’d shrugged. “It wasn’t so bad.”

He’d stared at her incredulously, though he hadn’t bothered to argue. It was too late, after all, her eyes shining with anticipation as she’d contemplated the new life growing inside her.

“Very well,” he’d said instead. “But this is the last time. I have no interest in competing with the Weasley clan.”

“Neither do I.”

“Then you wouldn’t object to me taking more... permanent measures to prevent future pregnancies?”

To his surprise, she’d agreed, even offering to help him brew the complicated potion. It had made him terribly ill for a couple days, but that had seemed like a small price to pay when he’d considered the end result.

“Severus?” she’d said as soon as he’d recovered. “When are we going to get married?”

“Whenever we stop finding reasons to put it off.”

“In that case, we’d better do it soon. I’d like to be able to fit into my wedding dress, and I *definitely* want to do it before the babies come. They’ll need a lot of attention, and with Sera to worry about, not to mention our jobs...”

“*They?*”

She’d nodded, giving him a sheepish look.

“You’re pregnant with *twins*? Dear god, don’t tell me you’re having triplets.”

“Twins. I’m sorry, Severus, I know you didn’t want...”

He’d hesitated, letting out a heavy sigh. “Is this what *you* want?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m sure I’ll adjust.”

They’d only had a month to plan the wedding, setting it for the day after school let out. Agreeing that a simple ceremony would be best, they’d chosen an outdoor location, a small hillside within walking distance of Hogwarts. Harry was in attendance, of course, sitting in the front row with Sera in his lap. The Weasleys were just behind him, taking up an entire row of chairs, and naturally, all the Hogwarts professors had chosen to attend. Beyond that, there were quite a few students, along with a handful of Order members.

But there were three faces Severus *hadn’t* expected to see, his eyes widening as he spotted them in the back row. The Malfoys were dressed in their finest, their eyes fixed on him as they sat stiffly in their chairs.

“Welcome,” said the Ministry official. “Shall we begin?”

Severus would never remember the vows he'd spoken, nor what Lily said in response. The words were no more than a formality, a confirmation of the truth he'd known since he was nine years old. She was the only woman he'd ever been destined to love, a bond that could neither be made or broken through a simple ceremony.

Nonetheless, it felt good to slide a ring on her finger, her eyes fixed on his as she returned the favor. It gave him a sense of completion, not to mention the unimaginable privilege of calling her his wife.

"You may kiss the bride."

Ignoring the cheers, he lowered his lips to hers, treating her to a slow, deep kiss that bordered on inappropriate. He'd never been one for public displays, but for once, he didn't care. It was their first kiss as a married couple — he intended to make damn sure she remembered it.

*"Oi, save it for the wedding night!"*

Severus didn't know which of the Weasleys had shouted, though he recognized the distinct sound of Molly slapping the idiot upside the head. Smirking, he offered his arm to Lily, ready to escort her back up to the Great Hall.

"Severus?"

He spun on his heel, finding himself face to face with Lucius Malfoy. The former Death Eater had aged quite a lot over the past few years, streaks of silver in his hair and deep lines in his elegant face. Nonetheless, he looked worlds better than the last time Severus had seen him, his lips curving into a small smile.

"May I be the first to congratulate you?"

Severus inclined his head. "Thank you."

"And you, Mrs. Snape. I wish you all the best."

"Please, call me Lily."

Lucius nodded, glancing at Narcissa and Draco. They were waiting beside a tree, well away from the others. "As you wish... Lily. There's a gift for both of you in the Great Hall."

"You're not coming to the reception?" she asked.

Shooting a quick glance at Severus, Lucius shook his head. "As much as we'd like to, I don't think it would be a good idea."

"But..."

"We'll be returning home for the summer," Severus interrupted smoothly. "Perhaps you might join us for dinner next month?"

"That sounds delightful. I'll have Narcissa send you an owl."

Severus watched him walk away, nodding to Draco and Narcissa before he returned his attention to Lily. "Ready?"

She grimaced. "I hope so."

“Are you feeling ill?”

“A little,” she admitted, laying a hand over her stomach. “I thought the morning sickness had passed, but...”

“We can skip it if you wish.”

“Our own reception?”

“Why not?”

She shook her head, lifting her chin as they walked toward the Great Hall. “It’s the only wedding reception we’ll ever have. I intend to enjoy it.”

“Fair enough.”

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“Come back here,” Harry said, scooping Sera into his arms. She squealed, reaching for another piece of cake as he settled them both at the table.

Ginny shook her head. “I can’t believe how big she’s gotten.”

“I know.”

Sera would be two years old in a couple months, having grown into a bright, inquisitive little toddler. She looked very much like Lily with her delicate features, except for the large, dark eyes that were a perfect reflection of her father’s. Her mannerisms were more like his, too, from the way she scowled when she was displeased to her intense focus on anything that captured her attention.

At the moment, her only focus was cake. Using one hand to shove a fistful in her mouth, she smeared frosting all over Harry’s robes with the other.

“She’s making a mess.”

He shrugged, tousling her soft auburn curls. “I don’t mind.”

“Of course not.” Ginny smiled, leaning over to kiss his cheek. “You know, Harry, you’re going to be a great father someday.”

“I hope so.”

With that, he couldn’t help but glance at the other fathers in the room. There was Arthur Weasley, struggling to hide his amusement while Molly scolded the twins for some prank they’d pulled. Beside them was Xenophilus Lovegood, smiling indulgently at Luna as she chatted with Hermione. There were other fathers, too, including several with children who weren’t much older than Sera.

But more than anyone, Harry’s eyes were drawn to Snape. He was standing just a few feet away, as imposing as ever in his billowing black robes. If Harry didn’t know him better, he’d think that the man was completely disinterested in the people around him, his features stern as he spoke with Minerva. But those dark eyes missed nothing, lingering on Sera before they strayed to Lily again.

“Are you okay with it?”

“What?” Harry blinked, returning his attention to Ginny.

“The baby. She’s having another one, isn’t she?”

“Two, actually. Due in November.”

“Twins? Wow…”

Lily had told him right after Easter, her hands trembling ever so slightly as she’d fixed them both a cup of tea. She’d asked the same question as Ginny, though he’d been quick to reassure her, pointing out how much he loved little Sera.

“Who knows?” he’d said. “One of them might even be interested in Quidditch.”

She’d laughed, telling him she couldn’t make any promises. He’d responded with a helpless shrug, both of them agreeing that with Snape as a father, it didn’t seem likely.

Snape. Harry knew that was the real reason Lily had worried over his reaction, afraid there might be some lingering resentment. Why else would it bother him? He knew he wasn’t being replaced by his younger siblings, and after growing up without a family, he’d hardly complain about having another sister or brother to love.

“It’s just that last time…”

“I know,” he interrupted, his eyes finding Ginny’s. She’d been the one he’d confided in right after the battle, helping him sort through all the conflicted feelings he hadn’t felt comfortable sharing with Lily herself. Ginny knew that for a brief time, Harry had resented the idea of Lily starting another family, that he’d even been jealous of his unborn sibling. Why should some other kid get to grow up under Lily’s care when Harry himself had never enjoyed that privilege?

“She gave you everything she could,” Ginny had pointed out. “If she hadn’t, you wouldn’t even be here.”

“You know what I mean, Gin.”

“If you need to blame anyone,” she’d said. “Blame Voldemort. It’s his fault that your mum wasn’t around, not hers. I’m sure if she’d had a choice…”

“Yeah, I know. But Voldemort’s dead.”

“Right, which means that the rest of us can finally live. Not just you and me and our friends, but your mum, too. She’s already lost so much because of him. Why should she have to keep putting her life on hold because of the things he did?”

“She shouldn’t,” he’d said. “But I just got her back, you know? I’m not sure I’m ready to share her.”

“Even though she has to share you?”

He’d frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re grown now. You’ve got me, your friends, other interests, all sorts of things to keep you busy. Soon enough, you’ll probably have a job as well. Are you ready to give all

that up so you can spend every waking hour with your mum?”

“Of course not, but...”

“She can’t go back and raise you, Harry. It’s too late for that. But she can build a new life for herself, even if that life is somewhat different than the one that was stolen from her. She needs other people to love, just like you do.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s just... why does it have to be *Snape*?”

Two years later, he finally knew the answer to that question, recalling all those memories he’d seen in the Pensieve. That was when he’d first realized that Snape had never been the person he’d thought he was, that there’d been rational explanations for even the worst of his behavior.

Still, that behavior hadn’t been easy to forget. Forgiveness had been a gradual process, from Snape’s first show of decency in the Room of Requirement to the letters they’d exchanged as he’d awaited his trial. Those careful overtures had eventually given way to something more comfortable, from harmless insults to Snape’s patience as he’d helped Harry adjust to his new position at Hogwarts.

But in the end, it wasn’t Snape’s behavior toward Harry that had healed those old wounds. It was his love for Lily, the devotion he showed to her and their little daughter. Through that, he’d proven himself to be a better man than Harry could’ve ever imagined, one he could honestly say he admired.

“Harry?” Ginny prompted.

His eyes lingered on Snape, noticing that his hand was now resting on Lily’s stomach. It was a protective gesture, one he probably wasn’t even aware of, his head dipping low as she murmured something in his ear. He pulled back a little, his expression almost tender as she smiled up at him.

“Yeah, Gin,” Harry said softly. “I’m okay with it.”

The reception began to die down, the room slowly emptying as guests bid the newly married couple farewell. Harry was in no hurry to leave, cradling his sleeping sister as Ginny rested her head on his shoulder. It was only when everyone else had gone that he rose from his seat, careful not to wake Sera as he passed her to Snape.

“Leaving?”

He nodded, taking Ginny’s hand as she came up beside him. “Lots of packing to do. We’re off to Wales in the morning.”

“Are you excited?” Lily asked Ginny.

“Too nervous to be excited. The Harpies...”

“Would be mad not to take you,” Harry finished for her. “You’ll be the best on their team.”

She looked dubious, though she didn’t bother to argue. Giving Lily a quick hug, she nodded at Snape before she left the four of them alone.

"I can't believe we won't be seeing you until September," Lily said, looking dangerously close to tears. "You'll be sure to write, won't you?"

"Of course." He hugged her, patting her back as she sniffled against his neck. "Anyway, it's only eight weeks, right?"

"I suppose."

Keeping an arm around her, Harry turned his attention to Snape. Tentatively, he held out his hand, their eyes meeting as they exchanged a lingering handshake. There were no words for what passed between them, but somehow, Harry knew that the past had been permanently laid to rest. True, they'd both wanted to bury their animosity for Lily's sake, but there was something deeper between them now. It was a quiet understanding, a genuine acceptance that didn't even need to be acknowledged.

Of course, that would've never happened without Lily. Her love had saved them both, so pure and deep that it left no room for hatred. That love had been powerful enough to destroy Voldemort himself, obliterating the darkness until there was nothing left but light.

Since then, Harry had come to understand the meaning of family. He wasn't just Lily's son or Sera's brother, but part of something bigger, as deeply bound to Snape as he was to those who shared his blood. It was a strange thought, one that would've horrified him in his younger years. But now...

"Sir?"

"You don't have to call me that."

"Right, um... Snape. Anyway, I just wanted to say..."

"Harry," Snape interrupted, his voice quiet. "Call me Severus."

For a moment, Harry could only stare at him, forgetting whatever it was he'd wanted to say. Opening and closing his mouth, he struggled to find the words, distracted by Lily as she started to sniffle again.

"Severus," he repeated, and it didn't feel nearly as awkward as he might've expected. "I wanted to tell you... that is, just take care of them, all right? Take care of my mum."

Severus nodded, his mouth twisting as he gazed down at his wife and child. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper, a single word echoing in Harry's ears as he turned to walk away.

"Always."

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**Post-Epilogue Note:** *I'm posting this last chapter on January 30, which would've been Lily's 57th birthday. I didn't plan it, but I love that it worked out that way. It has me thinking about what she and her family would be doing today.*

*Sera would be 18 years old, having recently finished her last year at Hogwarts. She's a Ravenclaw with a keen interest in writing/research/journalism, which started when she read Rita Skeeter's "Snape: Scoundrel or Saint?". She was so offended by the inaccurate portrayal*



of her father (and other sensationalistic wartime writings) that she'll ultimately dedicate her life to the pursuit of fair and accurate reporting.

The twins (names/genders undisclosed) are 16 years old, currently in their sixth year at Hogwarts. They were born on Halloween after an extremely difficult labor, which was even more frightening considering the significance of the day. Fortunately, Lily made a full recovery, though both she and Severus were relieved that there would be no more pregnancies.

Mirroring their parents, one twin was sorted into Gryffindor while the other ended up in Slytherin. It's a testament to how much times have changed that this separation has done nothing to interfere with the bond they share. The three children have grown up at Hogwarts (spending their summers at the cottage), and Lily, Severus, and Harry still teach at the school. Harry is 36 now, married to Ginny with children of his own, though he maintains close relationships with Lily and the rest of his family, including Severus.

All of them would've gotten together for Lily's birthday, though I'm sure that Severus would've stolen her away for a little alone time. They're able to enjoy that more often now that their children are older, and of course, they're as deeply in love as ever. In a few more years, they'll probably retire (though both are still relatively young by Wizarding standards). They'll both be ready for a quieter life, wanting to spend more time with each other and pursue individual interests.

They've been to hell and back, both together and separately, but in the end, that has turned out to be a blessing. It means they've never taken each other for granted, which will hold true for the rest of their lives.

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**Final Notes:** I started this story in early 2013, just a few months after I read the books and fell in love with Snape. At the time, I was extremely nervous about writing him. How could I possibly do him justice? And what about his relationship with Lily? Could I capture the beauty of that bond without it ultimately ending in tragedy?

Four years later, and I've never written a character I feel so comfortable with, nor a relationship that resonates with me so deeply. I know this story isn't perfect (no story ever is), but it helped me grow tremendously as a writer in terms of both skill and confidence.

It's only right that I should thank JK Rowling for that. If she hadn't created these brilliant characters (and given them such a tragic story), I would've never been inspired to write about them. But I'd also like to thank you guys, especially those of you who've taken the time to leave reviews. I can't wait to read your final thoughts, and for those of you who haven't reviewed, I'd love to hear from you as well.

I have two new stories in the works, so please follow me if you'd like to read more from me in the future.

Again, thank you so much for believing in this story. I'm tremendously grateful for all your support.